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12

Slavery and the Slave Trade in Ethiopian Studies

Edited by
Alexander Meckelburg, Giulia Bonacci,
Serena Tolino and Ahmed Hassen



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12

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On the spine: Donor *wāyzero* Dästa with a slave – Mural, 1923, Bātrā Maryam; Photo by Ewa Balicka-Witakowska; 29/11/2008, Courtesy of Māzgābā Səəlat, IMG_0881, <https://ethiopia.uts.utoronto.ca/doCmd.jsp?EBW-2008.051-007>.

On the back cover (from left to right): 'Abyssinian slave market', from J. Eppstein (ed, 1929) *Ten Years' Life of the League of Nations*, London: May Fair Press, 1929, 168; 'School for liberated slaves', from L. Farago, *Ethiopia on the Eve*. London: G.P. Putnam's Sons, (1935), 123; 'At the school of children of liberated slaves' from Kābbādā Mika'el 1948/1949. ኢትዮጵያ ምዕራባዊ ሥልጣኔ (Ityopyanna mə'arabawi sələttane, 'Ethiopia and Western Civilization'), tr. Marcel Hassid (Addis Abāba: Bəthanənna sālam matāmiya dərǧot, 1941 EC = 1948/1949 CE), 72; 'Portrait of an Abyssinian slave girl' from H. Salt, *A voyage to Abyssinia, and travels into the interior of that country*, London: F. C. and J. Rivington by W. Bulmer and Co., 1814 (to face p. 283).



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The editors,

London–Nice–Bern–Addis Ababa

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Maps

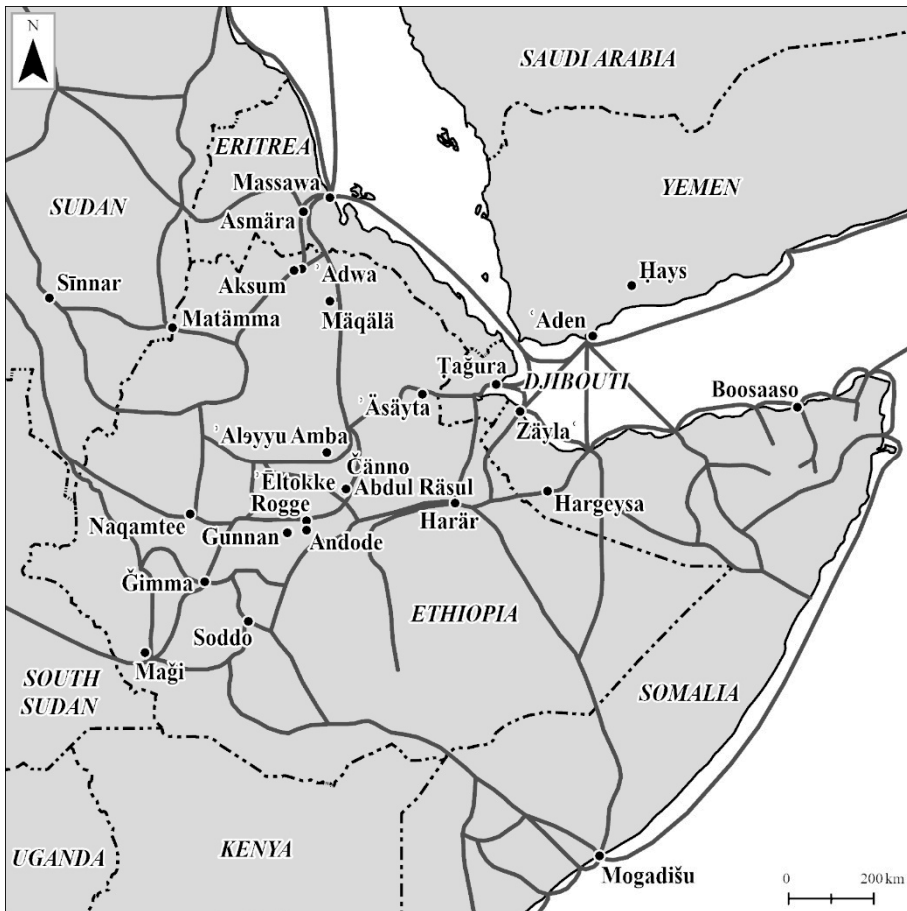


Fig. 1 Approximation of the major trade routes in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa at the end of the nineteenth century, showing some of the main slave markets (based on ‘Trade’, in *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, IV: *O–X*, edited by Siegbert Uhlig, in cooperation with Alessandro Bausi (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2010), p. 977a–b).

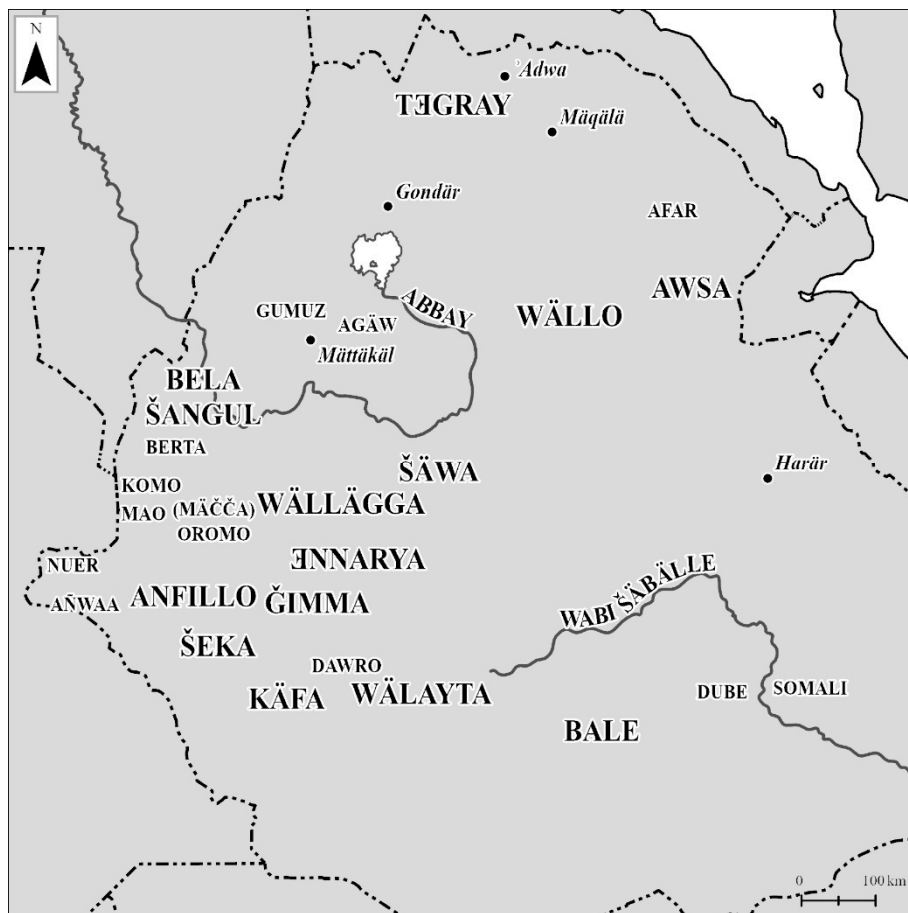


Fig. 2 Selected ethnic groups and independent and semi-independent slave-holding polities mentioned in the text: approximately mid-nineteenth century.

Slavery and the Slave Trade in Ethiopian Studies: Navigating an Emerging Field

ALEXANDER MECKELBURG, GIULIA BONACCI,
SERENA TOLINO, AND AHMED HASSEN

Introduction

Slavery and the slave trade bear undeniable significance in Ethiopian history. The study of slavery in Ethiopia was initially shaped by Richard Pankhurst in the 1960s and 1970s through the compilation of source materials and descriptive studies.¹ It did not progress much until Timothy Fernyhough's doctoral dissertation and a limited number of contributions from Ethiopian scholars like Abdussamad Hajji Ahmad and Tekalign Wolde Mariam.² Despite a few exceptions and occasional papers shedding light on various geographic, economic, and cultural aspects of slavery, Ethiopia hardly featured in the emerging collective attempts to understand slavery in Africa.³ Only a few general histories of Ethiopia significantly engage with this topic.⁴

The sources addressing slavery and the slave trade are diverse, spread across various genres and periods. Ethiopian sources include inscriptions, hagiographies, chronicles, court records, and oral sources. These are supplemented by the observations of Europeans, including travellers, politicians, administrators, and researchers.

Prior to the British expansion in the Horn of Africa in the mid-nineteenth century, travellers reported on various forms of slavery across Ethiopia, showing little concern for its existence. However, with the global abolitionist turn and the expansion of geopolitical interests in the Red Sea region since the middle of the nineteenth century, there was increased interest in the practice of slavery and the slave trade. A surge in studies and foreign legation reports can be attested to during Ethiopia's attempt to join the League of Nations in the early 1920s. These materials include reports by foreign legations, studies by researchers, and memoranda on Ethiopian anti-slavery progress.⁵ In turn, the Ethiopian govern-

1 Pankhurst 1968; Pankhurst 1977.

2 Fernyhough 1986; Fernyhough 1988; Abdussamad H. Ahmad 1986; Abdussamad H. Ahmad 1999; Salamon 1994; Salamon 1999; Tekalign W. Mariam 1984.

3 Exceptions are McCann 1988; Mekuria Bulcha 2005.

4 Perham 1948; Teshale Tibebu 1995.

5 These include the commissioned works by Marcel Griaule and George Montandon (cf. Griaule 1931; Montandon 1932).

ment responded to various allegations and requests by the League of Nations, its Commission on Slavery, and the Italian propaganda.

Overall, there has been a noticeable absence of systematic inquiries on slavery within Ethiopian studies, contributing to a disconnect with the broader African historiography on this subject. Traditionally, Ethiopian historiography has predominantly situated slavery within the economic and political dimensions of the slave trade.⁶ Only a few ethnographic histories actually give a sense of the different slaving systems as they existed across various Ethiopian societies.⁷ While the issue of slavery in Ethiopia was at the heart of various international debates focusing on its abolition between the 1920s–1940s, since then it has mostly been characterized by public silence. This is not unusual. An uncomfortable topic, it relates to dynamics of domination and inequality that could lead to re-evaluate contemporary interethnic relations: slavery has often—as elsewhere—been a thorny issue.⁸ However, engagement by Ethiopian researchers with both written and oral materials is progressively expanding in more recent publications.⁹ A notable shift occurred since the 2010s with an increase in scholarly articles focusing on post-slavery in Ethiopia and a particular emphasis on questioning the enduring legacies of slavery within the Ethiopian social fabric.¹⁰ With the objective of tackling the public silence that still surrounds slavery and the slave trade in Ethiopia in general—and the academic omission in Ethiopian studies in particular—scholars increasingly take up inquiries on the historical manifestations of slavery and their complex legacies, as witnessed in this Supplement.

This introduction addresses the state of the scholarship on slavery and its aftermath with the aim to highlight methodologies, identify gaps, and showcase new research. In Ethiopia, like elsewhere, collective memory related to slavery varies across different social spaces, as demonstrated in a significant part of this collection. Often, experience of enslavement is instrumentalized in the broader debate on the position of various groups vis-a-vis both the Ethiopian state and other groups or communities. Former institutions of asymmetrical dependency, including slavery, can become a powerful discursive tool even in present-day political debates. The articles in this Supplement also show that servile relationships have changed and transformed since abolition, and that looking at the transformation and legacies of former master-slave relationships offer insight into the complex social hierarchies and class distinctions present among Ethiopia's diverse ethnic groups up to today.

6 Bonacci and Meckelburg 2017; Markakis 2011.

7 Noteworthy works include Bartels 1983; Braukämper 2014; Haberland 1992; Lange 1982.

8 Bellagamba et al. 2013; Besteman 2014; Rossi 2016.

9 Habtamu Mengistie 2016; Yonas Ashine Demisse 2018; Yonas Ashine Demisse 2022.

10 Belrose 2013; Boshia Bombe 2018; Meckelburg 2015; Yonas Ashine Demisse 2024.

Enduring legacies of slavery are particularly evident in the social exclusion and marginalization that accompany the anachronistic use of the label ‘slave’ in various Ethiopian languages. The term conveys historical conceptions of inferiority and may involve a range of social taboos within and across ethnic communities. To navigate this complexity, the editors opted to use both the terms ‘slave’ and ‘enslaved person’. We use the term ‘slave’ to translate words found in various languages, such as the Somali ‘*addon*’, the Amharic ‘*barya*’, and the Oromo ‘*garba*’, explaining also their often-ambiguous usage. We use the terms ‘enslaved person’ to designate people who endured the hardships of slavery, to focus on their condition and experience rather than on their status alone. This shift in language reflects broader efforts to confront the historical manifestations of slavery and their contemporary legacies, and to promote understanding and empathy towards those who were defined by those lived experiences.¹¹

The articles in this Supplement contribute to the debate on the necessity to look at different forms of dependency, and not only slavery. Recent research has shown that the traditional binary slavery/freedom needs to be problematized for two main reasons: first, academic research on slavery has been largely focused on two main contexts, slavery in the Graeco-Roman world and transatlantic slavery,¹² that continue to inform our understanding of slavery also when looking at other historical and geographical contexts. Secondly, the concept of freedom is strongly connected to a Western ideal of individual autonomy that emerged during the Enlightenment and that challenged the monotheistic worldview that saw God as the main actor in the fate of the human being.¹³ This understanding of freedom does not necessarily fit different historical or social contexts.

This does not mean that the binary slavery/freedom is not relevant anymore: for example, from a legal perspective it simply cannot be avoided. However, it is important to keep in mind that in some cases different concepts may be more useful to understand the variety of forms that dependency can take. This is not a new debate: for example, already in a 2005 special issue of *Cahiers d'Études Africaines* titled *Esclavage moderne ou modernité de l'esclavage?* Roger Botte underscored the transformation of slavery into labour related oppression in African societies.¹⁴ He examined how exploitation has evolved amidst broader socio-economic changes and external influences, giving rise to new forms of labour exploitation that, while distinct in certain aspects, still retain structural and

11 Burns 2023.

12 Winnebeck et al. 2023, 4.

13 Ibid.

14 We are grateful to Benedetta Rossi for drawing our attention to this special issue. See Botte 2005.

dynamic similarities to slavery.¹⁵ In the same special issue, Alessandra Giuffrida used the term *métamorphoses des relations de dépendance* to analyse the dependency relationships within the Kel Antessar community in Goundam, Mali. She illustrated how historical systems of social dependency, influenced by slavery and servitude, have adapted in response to evolving political, economic, and social dynamics. These changes reflect broader shifts in power relations, mobility, and the redefinition of hierarchies in the postcolonial era, with traditional forms of dependency evolving rather than disappearing.¹⁶

We would like to briefly introduce here three concepts found particularly relevant for an improved understanding of the different case studies on which the authors in this Supplement focus: first, the concept of *strong asymmetrical dependency*, introduced by The Bonn Center for Dependency and Slavery Studies;¹⁷ second, the concept of *trajectories of slavery*, introduced by Benedetta Rossi in the 2009 volume *Reconfiguring Slavery: West African Trajectories*,¹⁸ and recently applied in the project ‘TraSIS: Trajectories of Slavery in Islamicate Societies: Three Concepts from Islamic Legal Sources’, based at the University of Bern.¹⁹ Lastly, we address the concept of *post-slavery*.²⁰

The concept of *strong asymmetrical dependency* was introduced by the Bonn Center for Dependency and Slavery Studies to replace the traditional dichotomy of slavery/freedom with a wider concept to accommodate and improve cross-cultural and transhistorical research. Three main characteristics define this concept. The first addresses the fact that asymmetrical dependency ‘occurs between two or more actors’, and that, in principle, these actors can be any kind of entity, ‘i.e. human beings, animals, elements of nature, material artefacts, gods and spirits’.²¹ The second shows how ‘asymmetrical dependency is based on the ability of one actor to control the action of another actor and/or their access to resources’.²² The third emphasizes how asymmetrical dependency is almost always supported by an institutional context to the extent by which dependent actors are not able to simply change their situation by either going away (the

15 Botte 2005.

16 Giuffrida 2005.

17 <https://www.dependency.uni-bonn.de/en>, accessed 30 April 2025.

18 Rossi 2016. The book is based on a 2007 international conference at SOAS, entitled *African Trajectories of Slavery*, that was funded by a British Academy Conference grant at the end of Benedetta Rossi postdoctoral research project ‘Trajectories of Servility at the Desert’s Edge’, financed by the UK Economic and Social Research Council (2005–2008).

19 Project financed by the Swiss Science National Foundation and based at the University of Bern (grant agreement no. 208124, PI Serena Tolino).

20 Lecocq and Hahonou 2015; Lecocq and Pelckmans 2023; Rossi 2015.

21 Winnebeck et al. 2023, 7.

22 Ibid., 8.

ability/freedom to ‘exit’) or articulating impactful protest (the ability/freedom to ‘voice’).²³

Although we acknowledge the challenges associated with using the term slavery, as well as the need for broader terms to facilitate the comparison of different phenomena in different historical and geographical contexts, we also agree with Benedetta Rossi that ‘for the sake of clarity, it is necessary to identify elements of a “lowest common denominator” of slavery that would include certain phenomena and exclude others’,²⁴ even if this means to come to a rather narrow definition of slavery.

The first such element is ownership: ‘Slavery refers to the individual or communal ownership of another person or group, whereby “ownership” is understood to reflect culturally specific meanings and forms of rights in things and persons, as well as their modes of transmission and exchange’.²⁵ This definition includes not only ownership of the productive capacities and assets of the enslaved, but also ownership of their reproductive labour. The second aspect is the characterization of the enslaved as an outsider, something that is embedded in what Rossi defines an ‘institutionalised exception’, that ‘justifies the slave’s otherwise unjustifiable exploitation, and is a defining characteristic of slavery across time and space’.²⁶

Rossi proposed four categories for analysing forms of slavery in the modern and contemporary worlds. Although *Reconfiguring Slavery* focused on West Africa, we believe that they are also useful categories in other contexts: (1) the persistence of historical forms of enslavement (what can genuinely be considered ‘slavery’); (2) forms of social stigmatization based on inherited or perceived slave status (classificatory slavery); (3) forms of exploitation resembling slavery (metaphorical slavery); and (4) exogenous discourses that introduce new perspectives on the notion of slavery (extraverted slavery).²⁷ The latter three categories are not types of slavery per se but rather related phenomena that interact with it in various ways.²⁸ All of them can be seen as *trajectories of slavery*, a concept that addresses some of the limitations inherent in the term *slavery* without disregarding its varieties and complexities. This notion emphasizes the historical transformations of dependencies rooted in slavery and examines how these dependencies have been reconfigured over time and across different spac-

23 Ibid.

24 Rossi 2016, 6.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid., 7.

27 See also Rossi’s Afterword (this Supplement). Also, these patterns feature prominently in the second part of this volume dealing with the legacies of slavery and post-abolition.

28 Rossi 2016, 1.

es, but also how they have been experienced differently by different people or group of people, even within the same period or region.

The concept of *trajectories of slavery* is also a valuable analytical tool for examining forms of dependency related to slavery or coercion that do not fit neatly into the binary slavery/freedom. For example, when focusing on Islamicate societies, it is striking to note that, even though in Islamic law slavery is a clearly established concept, Muslim jurists do not provide a clear and agreed definition of it, simply taking it for granted that everyone would understand its meaning. Moreover, the term is used to describe very different phenomena, from domestic elite slavery to agricultural or construction slavery, and the varying nature between these extremes made scholars reflect on the suitability of any one encompassing term.²⁹ Therefore, the team members of the project TraSIS apply the concept of *trajectories of slavery* to describe forms of dependency related to slavery or coercion, but that depart from a clear-cut understanding of it.³⁰ This includes for example the *umm al-walad* (literally ‘the mother of the child’, a term used by Muslim jurists to describe a female slave who has given birth to the child of her owner, provided he recognized the paternity, and who will become free once the master dies), the *kitāba* (a contract between a owner and a slave according to which the slave is required to pay a certain sum of money during a specific time period in exchange for freedom) and the *kafāla* (originally a legal guarantee within commercial law which in the twentieth century became an instrument for either the tutelage of children, especially in the Maghreb, or for the control of labour migration in the Gulf, Lebanon and Jordan).

The last concept we would like to introduce is *post-slavery*. In post-slavery Ethiopia, the term refers to the enduring historical and social contexts where slavery was a key institution, and its abolition left persistent legacies of past hierarchies and abuses. Constructing and analysing Ethiopia as a post-slavery society involves acknowledging that the abolition of slavery did not fully reverse the structural inequalities created by it. These inequalities continue to shape the everyday lives of millions, reflecting the hidden predicaments that slavery has left behind.³¹ We believe that these three concepts capture the variety of meanings that slavery has in the Ethiopian context, as shown by the authors in this Supplement.

This Supplement has been organized into three main parts: an introduction to provide a general framework for the study of slavery in Ethiopia; and twelve chapters covering the historical formation of slavery, its historical and contemporary legacies, and a discussion of sources. A comprehensive bibliography on slavery in Ethiopian studies closes the volume.

29 Franz 2017, 125; Brown 2019, 15–65.

30 Tolino et al. 2022.

31 Lecocq and Hahonou 2015; Lecocq and Pelckmans 2023.

The papers collected here originate from the close collaboration of Ethiopian and international scholars, facilitated by the European Research Council (ERC)-funded project SLAFNET (2017–2023). This collaboration has further grown through the ERC-funded AFRAB project (2020–2025), that sheds new light on the abolition of slavery in African societies,³² and the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF)-funded project TraSIS.³³ This publication was originally conceived as the proceedings of the 2019 SLAFNET Spring School on Slavery and the Slave Trade in Ethiopia, organized by the SLAFNET project in partnership with the University of Hamburg, particularly the Hiob Ludolf Centre for Ethiopian and Eritrean Studies (HLCEES) and the Department of History and Culture of the Middle East at the Asia and Africa Institute, the research unit Migrations and Society (URMIS) of the University of Côte d’Azur in Nice, the Institute of Research for Sustainable Development (IRD), the Institute of Ethiopian Studies (IES) at Addis Ababa University.³⁴ During the Spring School, several junior and senior researchers gathered in Addis Abāba to present their ongoing research, and thereafter, over the course of two years, a dozen Ethiopian researchers were invited to develop their manuscripts at the University of Hamburg during visiting research fellowships facilitated by the HLCEES. While some papers produced by this initiative have been selected for the present collection, contributions by other scholars were solicited. Following an early special issue published in 2017 and various reference studies, the present volume is aimed at further scrutinizing the history of slavery in Ethiopia.³⁵ Building on that previous work, this collection underscores the centrality of the legacies of slavery and dependency in social relations across various Ethiopian societies.

The Slave Trade in and out of Ethiopia

Ethiopia’s strategic geographic location, situated between the Red Sea and near the Nile Valley, made it a pivotal node in the global slave trade network connecting East Africa, the Mediterranean, and the Arabian and Indian Ocean regions. Knowledge from very different cultural areas and periods must thus be

32 ‘Slavery in Africa: a Dialogue between Africa and Europe’, SLAFNET (grant agreement no. 734596) and ‘African Abolitionism: The Rise and Transformations of Anti-Slavery in Africa’, AFRAB (grant agreement no. 885418); see <https://slafnet.hypotheses.org/> and <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/history/research/african-abolitionism-rise-and-transformations-anti-slavery-africa>.

33 <https://trasisblog.unibe.ch/?p=1>.

34 <https://slafnet.hypotheses.org/files/2019/04/SLAFNET-Spring-School-Program.pdf>.

35 A first special issue of *Northeast African Studies* was co-edited by Giulia Bonacci and Alexander Meckelburg (2017) based on papers presented during the first research seminar on forced labour and migrations in Ethiopia, organized by Bonacci (IRD) and Gideon Ad-disse Tumdedo at Addis Ababa University between 2011 and 2014. Other articles of reference include Bonacci and Meckelburg 2023 and Meckelburg and Bonacci 2024.

mobilized to get an overview of the far-reaching slave trade originating in the Ethiopian region. Since ancient times, enslaved individuals were transported across that extensive expanse of sea, dating as far back as the Pharaonic era.³⁶ The Red Sea trade forced enslaved people, those captured, abducted, or bought in inland supply regions within modern-day Sudan, South Sudan, Eritrea, and Ethiopia, to be displaced overland to Red Sea ports. From these ports, they were predominantly shipped to western and southern Arabia and Egypt. While some enslaved individuals stayed in the initial ports, others were either immediately or later redistributed to more distant destinations, including North Africa, the eastern Mediterranean region, modern-day Turkey and the regions to which the entire Ottoman Empire extended, Sudan, the Arabian Peninsula, the Persian (or Arabian) Gulf, Iran, India, and beyond.³⁷

The transcontinental trade left enduring imprints on identities across the receiving countries, but detailed biographies of these diasporas are rare. Figures like Malik Ambar, originally an Abyssinian slave, ascended to influential positions in India,³⁸ as did eunuchs in several dynasties of the Islamic world, such as Habeshi Mehmed Agha in the Ottoman Empire, whose life and formidable influence had have been meticulously reconstructed by Jane Hathaway.³⁹ Other biographies survived, for instance that of *Šayḥ* Yāqūt al-Ḥabašī, usually referred to as an ‘Ethiopian slave’, who was a most revered Sufi master.⁴⁰ Matteo Salvatore meticulously reconstructs the life of Gabriel, an enslaved Ethiopian, tracing his odyssey through enslavement until he faced persecution by a Jesuit court in Goa. Salvatore portrays Gabriel’s narrative as one of enslavement situated in the periphery of the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia and on the African fringes of the broader Islamic world. Additionally, he presents it as a diasporic tale within the Indian Ocean world, specifically a Habši, or Afro-Indian, narrative characterized by mobility and fluid identification along the Indo-Portuguese imperial frontier. Gabriel’s case serves as an early modern global life history, offering a unique perspective on the exercise of individual agency in the face of institutionalized exploitation and surveillance across diverse Indian Ocean world locations.⁴¹

Ethiopia fed the trade of enslaved people both in the Nile Valley and the Red Sea and through the Gulf of Aden as well as the Indian Ocean trade.⁴² The Red

36 Collins 1992; Ewald 2013; ‘Slavery’, *EAE*, IV (2010), 673a–681b (R. Pankhurst, J. Miran, D. Bustorf, and W. Smidt). For a slightly later period, there is also Bouanga 2017.

37 Jayasuriya and Pankhurst 2003; Miran 2022; Mirzai 2002; Pankhurst 1980.

38 Jayasuriya 2008; Ali 2016.

39 We also have a very short account of his enslavement that was supposedly told by Habeshi Mehmed Agha himself. Hathaway 2018, 55–76.

40 Cecere 2019.

41 Salvatore 2020.

42 Abdussamad H. Ahmad 2013.

Sea slave trade has ancient roots. While evidence for the period between 800 and 1600 is limited, estimates suggest that approximately 1,600,000 slaves were exported, averaging around 2,000 annually. In the seventeenth century, the Red Sea export trade maintained a consistent flow of around 1,000 slaves per year, a number that increased to an estimated 2,000 slaves annually in the eighteenth century.⁴³ In the nineteenth century, there was a sustained demand for enslaved persons in the region, resulting in a surge of slave exports. Analysing the dynamics of the trade, Ewald emphasizes cycles of extreme violence and coercion rather than high profits as the driving forces sustaining slave raiding and trading. This involved armed men, often initially slave soldiers, seeking means of survival through capturing slaves. The process unfolded through a complex chain involving itinerant traders and merchants challenging prevailing commercial dynamics in Arabia.⁴⁴

Examining pricing dynamics on the coast, Ralph Austen and Richard Pankhurst shed light on the variations in slave prices. In the 1870s, enslaved adults near Massawa were sold for 40 to 70 dollars, while in Tağūra in 1888 boys fetched 50 dollars, and girls 60 to 70 dollars. In markets in North Africa and the Middle East, Ethiopian slaves commanded higher prices compared to enslaved Sudanese, as attested by records of transactions in Alexandria in 1873, where Ethiopians were sold for 400 to 500 dollars, surpassing the 200 to 300 dollars paid for Sudanese individuals.⁴⁵ According to Gabriel Baer, in the nineteenth century the price of Ethiopian male slaves was a little higher than that of Black slaves for enslaved children, but the difference increased with age. The price of female slaves from Ethiopia was instead much higher and showed differences of between 25 and 600 per cent.⁴⁶ Pankhurst estimated the value of these slave exports to have been around 50,000 dollars annually.⁴⁷

Slave markets in what are present-day Ethiopia and Eritrea connected the hinterland with the main southern and south-western slaving zones with the export hubs on the coast.⁴⁸ Besides the low-scale raiding by gangs, expansionist wars and military conquests resulted in the enslavement of prisoners of war and individuals taken as booty from raided communities. Chroniclers of the Christian emperors documented such raids.⁴⁹ Enslaved persons were given as gifts or sold on slave markets. The slave trade was often taxed by regional rulers. Thus, an

43 Collins 2006, 335.

44 Ewald 2013.

45 Austen 1988; Pankhurst 1964.

46 Baer 1967, 427.

47 Pankhurst 1964.

48 Ahmed Hassen Omer 2020.

49 Solomon Gebreyes 2019; see also, in this volume, the contribution of David Spielman on Christian medieval texts, chronicles, and hagiographies as sources to understand the practices of raiding, enslavement and slaveholding.

economic network of traders and customs control was formed throughout the various regions.⁵⁰ Trade routes for slave merchants extended from Ānnarya and Ġimma in the south to the slave markets in Šāwa and Goğğam, like Rogge, Aləyyu Amba or Basso.⁵¹

Testimonies from freed slaves, both those crossing the border with Sudan and those freed during transport across the Red Sea, offer insights into the experience of numerous individuals, particularly women and children. These narratives vividly depict raids, the changing of hands between owners and traders, and the enslaved' odysseys to far-away slave markets.⁵² Biographies of enslaved people can be representative of the experiences of others and shed light on specific patterns of slavery, slave descent, and stratification that differ from the Atlantic paradigm, with its strong emphasis on plantation slavery and the birth of racialized diasporic identities. Testimonies of enslaved people in the Red Sea and Indian Ocean are usually hidden in reminiscences, biographies and in the cultural realm of diasporic practices.⁵³

Slavery in Ethiopia

Slavery was not confined to one region, ethnic community, or belief system. Instead, a diverse set of political institutions and organizations participated in slavery, necessitating an analysis based on political structures rather than a single chronology for the whole area. To understand the involvement of each political entity in slavery, Ethiopia can be categorized into three main types of political organizations: city-states, complex chiefdoms or kingdoms, and segmentary societies.

City-states, like Aksum, while few in the history of Ethiopia, were significantly involved in slavery, creating a hinterland where the Aksumite kingdom conducted slave raids. These slaves were then shipped through the Red Sea port of Adulis. The decline of Aksum and the subsequent destruction by the Agāw led to the decreased importance of city-states. From the thirteenth century onwards, more centralized kingdoms developed across the northern highlands and southern Ethiopia.⁵⁴

Between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries the Gonga kingdoms of Anfillo, Šeko, and Kāfa in southern Ethiopia were hierarchically structured with caste groups, hunters, and slaves forming the lowest social stratum. Slaves were situated at the lowest rung of the social hierarchy, often experiencing limited social

50 Moore-Harell 1999.

51 Abdussamad H. Ahmad 2013; Ahmed Hassen Omer 2020.

52 Shell 2018; Spaulding 1988.

53 Ababu Minda Yimene 2004; Astair Gebremariam Mengesha 2003; Mirzai 2002; Natvig 1987; Walz and Cuno 2010.

54 Gamst 1970; Haberland 1965.

interactions with free individuals, although social mobility was possible and probably even common.⁵⁵ In highly structured kingdoms like Kāfa or Šeko in southern Ethiopia, slaves consistently occupied the lowest social stratum, ranking below occupations such as hunters and tanners. Despite this, distinct roles and status levels existed among royal slaves and servants. Conflicts between Christian and Muslim polities during the sixteenth century resulted in widespread enslavement of the rural population. The westward migration of the Oromo since the sixteenth century further transformed the socio-political structure of both the Oromo and the people they conquered.

The southern kingdoms, except for Kāfa, and Wālaytta were eventually overrun during the Oromo during the sixteenth century who probably took on the pre-existing servile relations and institutions in the Gibe states. In Ānnarya and Ġimma, for example, slaves played an essential role in plantation schemes.⁵⁶ The Oromo kingdoms were semi-feudal structures with vassal groups and integrated slaves. These kingdoms, whether under the Gongga or later the Oromo, were crucial trading centres connected to the Ethiopian highlands through a network of slave markets. These markets facilitated long-distance slave routes to the Red Sea coast and Sudan.

Military slavery also played a crucial role, with figures like the Oromo *mooti* (king) Ġootee Tulluu overseeing large groups of Dinka and Nuer slaves-soldiers in the nineteenth century.⁵⁷ Elite slaves and military slaves were also important in the expansion and consolidation of the northern Ethiopian kingdoms.⁵⁸

Slavery's intrinsic connection to hierarchical structures often led to a stark division between groups, 'us the free' and the 'slave other'—'slave' being universally defined as a stranger, torn from kin and country. Lineage-based chiefdoms like the Berta and Añwaa, Hadiyya and Kāmbata also practiced slavery.⁵⁹ In these societies, slaves could achieve social mobility through manumission, akin to practices in the Ethiopian highlands where Christian law provided for the manumission of slaves.⁶⁰

Segmentary societies such as the 'Afar, Somali, and Nuer, while not formal slaveholding societies, played significant roles in the regional dynamics of the slave trade. These pastoralist groups often acted as intermediaries in the trade, with the 'Afar sultanate of Awsa notably involving slaves as an important means of taxation and trade. The slave trade through 'Afar was taxed, illustrating a

55 Grottanelli 1940; Haberland 1992; Lange 1982.

56 Mohammed Hassen 1990.

57 James et al. 1996.

58 Yonas Ashine Demisse 2018.

59 Braukämper 2012; Braukämper 2014; Perner 1994.

60 Takele Merid and Meckelburg 2024; Yonas Ashine Demisse 2022.

system where boundaries between chiefdoms and kingdoms facilitated the capture and trade of slaves.⁶¹

The legacy of slavery in Ethiopia is evident in the socio-political and economic landscapes shaped by various forms of slavery. This legacy includes the stigmatization of often landless Muslim trading communities like the Walasma and Argobba, who played significant roles in the slave trade. Acephalous lineage-based societies like the Gumuz or Komo were more often victims of the slave trade than traders themselves, highlighting the complex interactions within the broader Ethiopian slaving systems.

Travel reports from the nineteenth century describe a system of petty trade alongside large-scale raiding. The most significant slave trade occurred during the expansion of the kingdom of Šäwa and the establishment of the Ethiopian empire under King Mənilək II. His expansionist campaigns led to the capture and enslavement of many individuals. This expansion overlaid previous forms of enslavement where vassal groups and slaves became serfs on newly established administrative lands of the Ethiopian empire.

Slave-ownership was not exclusive to the wealthy; peasants could own slaves, too. Despite the significance of family labour in rural Ethiopia, slaves remained integral to various aspects of work, and slave labour always coexisted with free family labour. The role of slave labour in agriculture and its impact on the Ethiopian economy are subjects of inquiry, with evidence suggesting the use of slaves in coffee farms. However, the main market for slave labour within Ethiopia was probably in the domestic realm, mainly targeting children and women.⁶²

Enslaved populations typically consisted of individuals from different societies or kinship groups. Both Islam and Orthodox Christianity strongly opposed enslaving co-religionists, with Islam categorically rejecting the enslavement of Muslims, and Orthodox Christianity prohibiting the trade and enslavement of fellow Christians. As Jeffrey Fynn-Paul pointed out, ‘the creation of the Christian and Islamic monotheistic blocs was a major turning point in the history of the Greater Mediterranean slave system, since these empires came to adopt a religious-ethical taboo against the enslavement of the majority of their inhabitants’, what he called a no-slaving zone, namely an area ‘considered off limits for slave raiding by that society’.⁶³

However, the legal framework of slavery operated within a complex cultural and legal pluralism across Ethiopia. Different regions had distinct local laws or were influenced by foreign laws, shaping how slavery was regulated and admin-

61 Fieldnotes A. Meckelburg, Samara, 2020.

62 McCann 1987; McCann 1988.

63 Fynn-Paul 2009, 4. See also Fynn-Paul and Pargas 2018.

istered.⁶⁴ Most norms and regulations were transmitted orally; only few orally transmitted principles were later transcribed by European researchers and administrators. While useful, these texts must be approached critically and cautiously, as they suffer from biases and misunderstandings.⁶⁵ A crucial aspect was manumission, or the culturally sanctioned freeing of slaves or their integration into lineage, kin and family. Arguably the most important and most widely studied legal text dealing (among other things) with slavery is the *Fəṭḥa nəgāśt*, the *Law of the Kings*. At the turn of the twentieth century, following the violent territorial expansion of the Ethiopian empire in the nineteenth century, the *Fəṭḥa nəgāśt* became the central legal text regulating slavery. It defined manumission as an act of religious piety,⁶⁶ regulated legitimate forms of emancipation for the enslaved,⁶⁷ making manumission an integral part of the Ethiopian ethics of slavery. The *Fəṭḥa nəgāśt* informed the emerging anti-slavery legalization.⁶⁸ Since the late nineteenth century abolishing slavery and the slave trade became both a humanitarian and political objective. The relationship between colonial ambitions and domestic politics is important to understanding abolition in Ethiopia, and it should be noted that Ethiopia was not an indifferent recipient of international anti-slavery politics: it engaged with these global dynamics and progressively developed a national anti-slavery strategy.

Unlike peasants or serfs (*gäbbar*), slaves (*barya*) were considered commodities. The terms ‘slave’ and ‘*gäbbar*’ represent complex social and economic concepts, varying in meaning across different regions and periods. In the northern Ethiopian kingdoms, *gäbbar* were primarily tenants who paid taxes and tribute to their landlords. However, as the Ethiopian empire expanded southward in the late nineteenth century, both free and enslaved individuals were subjected to new oppressive relations by the conquering empire and turned into *gäbbar* and compelled to work for the new rulers. During this period, both slaves and serfs often lived and worked in comparable conditions. The latter were subject to sale if unable to meet their obligations, sometimes even entering debt bondage by selling themselves when faced with crop failures.⁶⁹

The End of Slavery in Ethiopia

Before the mid-nineteenth century, diplomatic missions to Ethiopia showed little concern or involvement with slavery. It wasn’t until the 1830s that there was a

64 Bonacci and Meckelburg 2023.

65 Some of these oral legal codes were written by researchers, explorers and the Italian colonial administration (cf. Bartels 1983; Munzinger 1859; Saleh Mohammad and Nicole 2015).

66 Pankhurst 2011; Strauss 1968.

67 Yonas Ashine Demisse 2024.

68 Takele Merid and Meckelburg 2024.

69 Garretson 1986; McClellan 1978; Teshale Tibebu 1995.

growing tendency to adopt an anti-slavery stance in diplomatic relations. The first notable mission of British Major William Cornwallis Harris to Šahlä Šəllase, then king of Šäwa, aimed to conclude a treaty of friendship and commerce in the 1840s. The mission's goals, emphasizing the establishment of a friendly connection between Britain and Šäwa, increased commercial intercourse, traveller protection, and advocacy for abolition. The mission resulted in some of the most important reports on slavery as practiced at the Šəwan court (since the late 1840s).⁷⁰ Missionary Theophilus Waldmeier, who resided in Ethiopia for ten years, became a strong advocate of the abolitionist efforts of Emperor Tewodros (r.1855–1868). Tewodros reportedly liberated hundreds of slaves from a dealer near Gondär, instructing Waldmeier to teach them arts and religion, expressing his commitment to their freedom and providing material support to help them transition to their new life as freed persons.⁷¹

As the British Anti-Slavery Society increasingly received reports from missionaries and travellers with intimate knowledge of Ethiopia, the *Anti-Slavery Reporter*, the outlet of the Anti-Slavery Society, evolved into a political and pro-Ethiopian platform. The journal not only published the opinions of the Anti-Slavery Society but also provided a medium for Ethiopian rulers to reach out to an international audience. The society demonstrated a keen interest in the Ethiopian case, aligning with Ethiopians' hope to address political issues through the society. The Egyptian–Ethiopian war (1874–1876) prompted King Mənilək of Šäwa (r.1865–1889, after 1889 he became emperor) and Emperor Yoħannəs IV (r.1872–1889) to seek the society's help in raising awareness regarding the port blockage by the Egyptian government. The October 1879 issue of the *Reporter* featured Yoħannəs's letter, decrying the strong political challenge posed by the war.⁷² According to James Heartfield, Abyssinia and its Christian kings were highly regarded in Britain, due also to the visibility of their contributions to the *Reporter*.⁷³

After signing a treaty with the British in 1884 and receiving substantial support from foreign backers like Emilius Albert De Cosson and Gerhard Rohlfs, Yoħannəs came to be remembered as a major champion of abolition.⁷⁴ However, the war that ensued during Ethiopia's southward expansion and territorial consolidation at the end of the nineteenth century, resulted in large-scale enslavement of the conquered population. In the eyes of the international abolitionist movement, Ethiopia's image, in the early twentieth century, shifted drastically, from being a beacon of abolitionism to being the last culprit of slavery. Not

70 Harris 1844; Krapf 2002.

71 Waldmeier 1886.

72 Meckelburg and Solomon Gebreyes 2017.

73 Heartfield 2016.

74 Pankhurst 2005.

surprisingly, the Anti-Slavery Society's tone towards Ethiopia changed significantly over the three decades that followed.

Subsequently, Italian propaganda exploited the slavery narrative as a pretext for invading Ethiopia under the guise of a civilizing mission.⁷⁵ Anti-slavery sentiments, however, gained significance for Ethiopia's pursuit of League of Nations membership and also to counter Italian propaganda whose purpose was to create the circumstances resulting in the 1935–1937 war between Italy and Ethiopia. Despite initial rejection, Ethiopia was admitted to the League of Nations in 1923, largely because of its stated commitment to suppress slavery. In response to the League of Nations' demands, Ethiopia revised its anti-slavery legislation in 1923 and 1924.⁷⁶

While some provinces showcased actions against slave traders, peripheral provinces faced challenges due to a weak state and local governors' complicity with slave traders.⁷⁷ The Anti-Slavery Society voiced dissatisfaction with the slow progress overall, recognizing the efforts of Lord Noel-Buxton (then chairperson of the Anti-Slavery Society) but ultimately asserting that slavery persisted in various forms in Abyssinia. The League of Nations and its expert committees remained divided on the state of slavery in Ethiopia, and a faction within the Anti-Slavery Society advocated for a colonial solution to effectively end slavery in Ethiopia. Italy exploited the issue in its propaganda, portraying Ethiopia as a bastion of slavery and thus justifying its civilizing mission.

The Italian occupation (1937–1941) not only prematurely halted the government's attempts to end slavery and fulfil Ethiopia's obligations to the league but also exacerbated the divide between supporters and opponents of the emperor on the issue of slavery. Even after the end of the Italian occupation, the Anti-Slavery Society expressed ongoing concern that Britain's 1942 agreement with Ethiopia, that aimed at re-establishing an independent Ethiopia after the ousting of the Italian troops, lacked an anti-slavery clause, potentially posing the risk of a resurgence of slavery in peripheral regions. Recent and ongoing research drawing on prison records, interregional political and administrative communications, as well as recently accessible court files from Däbrä Marqos provide evidence of this enduring struggle.⁷⁸ These sources reveal instances in which human trafficking and violations of anti-slavery legislation were brought to court, indicating that the fight against slavery extended well into the 1950s and remained significant.⁷⁹

75 Satta 2016.

76 Gardiner 1933; Takele Merid and Meckelburg 2024.

77 Miers 1997.

78 The archival centre there holds a few court files that show the continued fights against enslavement and human trafficking until the late 1940s (cf. Ayenew Mammo Seyoum 2022).

79 Feigh 2022; see also Lacy Feigh's chapter in this collection.

The Legacies of Slavery

Despite successive initiatives by Ethiopian rulers to eradicate slavery, its legacies have continued shaping contemporary intergroup relations, exerting a protracted and profound influence over the nation's historical and societal fabric. This does not imply the existence of slavery in its historical forms. Nonetheless, descent from slaves and associated stigma inform current social relations and classifications. Additionally, forms of bondage and exploitation reminiscent of historical slavery endure, manifesting as modern slavery and human trafficking.⁸⁰ Here the concept of trajectories of slavery seems particularly promising. Historicizing emancipation and bondage can aid in understanding present forms of dependency, providing insights into the formation of a post-slavery society.

The analytical concept of post-slavery allows for an exploration of the legacies of slavery in patterns of stigmatization, racism, and exclusion based on real or perceived slave descent.⁸¹ We may borrow from West African slavery studies: the limited persistence of historical forms of enslavement (actual slavery), stigmatization based on perceived slave descent, classificatory slavery encompassing forms of exploitation akin to slavery, and metaphorical slavery.⁸² These four rubrics can help our enquiry into the legacies of slavery and comprehending its diverse legacies. Firstly, the social implications of the end of slavery remain insufficiently studied. Questions arise about how the transition from being a slave to being a free person was organized and what implications it carried. It is presumed that many slaves integrated into families, particularly those with only a few resident slaves. Interviews in the Aläyyu Amba region underscored the cordial relationships between manumitted slaves and their former masters. 'Milk mothers' maintained affectionate connections with the children of their former masters, exchanging gifts during Islamic holidays, providing mutual support, and hosting each other during visits.⁸³

Secondly, racial categories were ingrained in the state-making process, leaving a double legacy of slavery. Especially in the western Nilotic lowlands and the south, the term '*ṣanqalla*' persisted, carrying connotations considered negative such as being Black, backward, or enslavable. This term found use in scientific and administrative discourse until the 1960s and was linked to the idea of slaving zones from which Black *barya* were taken. Despite being outlawed and scarcely used publicly today, it's crucial to recognize that the state-making process perpetuated racial categories and associated statuses on a national scale. At one extremity, are the conquerors, the Abyssinians, regarded as light-skinned ('*qäy*' in Amharic, literally 'red'), at the other extremity are those individually

80 Duane and Meiners 2021; Singh and Tolla 2018.

81 Lecocq and Pelckmans 2023.

82 Rossi 2016.

83 Fieldnotes, interviews by Meckelburg and Ahmed Hassen, Aläyyu Amba, 2020.

referred to as ‘black’ (*‘taqur’*). These distinctions not only inform the national discourse of citizenship and belonging but also serve as important class distinctions at a local level. The descendants of slaves are lumped alongside other despised groups within Ethiopia’s complex interethnic hierarchies.

Tom Boylston observed the enduring impacts of slavery in the monastic community of Zäge on Lake Tana. The term *‘barya’*, even if used jokingly among teenagers to designate their Black (slave descended) friends, ‘actually carries a serious and wounding insult’.⁸⁴ While this does not hinder boys from being friends, it acts as a lasting reminder of an underlying difference that becomes more evident when questions of romance or marriage arise.

While the term *barya* (or the slightly less harsh version, *‘barāčo’*) denotes the persistence of old hierarchies, its use is often defended as term of endearment even within households or among friends. It refers to skin colour, curly hair and other traits characterizing Blackness.

Skin colour and descent are widespread markers of marginalization attested in Ethiopia and beyond,⁸⁵ such as in Yemen, Tunisia or Morocco for example.⁸⁶ There are many theoretical and methodological questions still unanswered due to a lack of data on the social status of slaves across Ethiopian societies, but the legacies of slavery remain one of the burning contemporary issues requiring carefully designed studies.⁸⁷

Outline and Chapters

This collection presents new studies delving into the intricate legacies and epistemologies of slavery in Ethiopia. The chapters take a fresh look at slavery in Ethiopia, its historical manifestations, and its legacies; and introduce new source materials. Some authors suggest a starting point for innovative new research while others present new takes on slavery.

The collection is organized into four sections. The first section focuses on the historical manifestations of slavery and the slave trade, exploring different interpretations of the past. The second addresses the question of post-slavery, highlighting the gradual demise of slavery, its lingering legacies and the politicization of slavery’s memory across various spaces. The third examines the presentation and the interpretation of sources. It is important to keep in mind that this collection diverges from conventional approaches to the slave trade, as it does

84 Boylston 2018.

85 For Ethiopia see also Dereje Feyissa 2014; Meckelburg 2015; see also Küspert-Rakodondrainy in this volume (and Küspert-Rakotondrainy 2023). For other cases from across Africa see e.g. Hall 2011; Hall 2020; Thioub 2012.

86 For Yemen see Moorthy-Kloss 2023; for Tunisia Scaglioni 2020; for Morocco El Hamel 2012.

87 See also Data Dea Barata 2017.

not primarily examine the slave trade along the Red Sea or the Nile Valley. While we recognize the significance of this trade route, our focus lies on the internal practice and legacies of slavery. A unique feature of this collection is its emphasis on the internal slave routes within Ethiopia and the development of distinct Ethiopian legacies of diverse forms of slavery.

The articles in the first section delve into the various manifestations of slavery within Ethiopia, exploring its presence in different regions and among different communities. It opens with an historical exploration of the slave trade in southern Ethiopia. From the vantage point of the *keela*, the gate system of the protective stone walls that encircled the kingdom of Dawuro, Admasu Abebe sheds light on the complex and intertwined manifestation of the slave trade in southern Ethiopia. Building on long term oral and historiographic research the paper explores the *keela* as a defence mechanism against slave raids, a tax collection point for the slave trade as well as a ritual space for the purification of slaves upon entry into the kingdom of Dawuro.

David Spielman redirects attention from areas where slavery was regulated by traditional religions to the legal framework provided by Orthodox Christianity and Islam. Surveying the prevalence of slavery throughout medieval texts, hagiographies, and chronicles, the article proceeds to discuss the legal regulations provided by Christianity and Islam on the institution of slavery. Legal principles within these faiths established religious identity as the basis for the legitimacy of enslavement, creating a dichotomy in which co-religionists were deemed non-enslavable, with others considered enslavable, shaping subsequent patterns. Although slaves were sometimes converted to their master's religion, their living conditions often remained unchanged both post-conversion and post-emancipation. Understanding the role of religious identity in enslavement practices provides insights into the evolution of slavery and the construction of social hierarchies used to justify it over time. This raises an important question about the integrative capacity of slavery and the status of enslaved individuals in the slave owning society. Both articles show the clear need to demarcate slavery from non-slavery, spaces (or groups) that are considered un-enslavable (or should be so), from those that are considered vulnerable to slavery. In this sense, the dichotomy slavery/freedom shows its relevance also in current academic debates.

Moreover, for a long time slavery in Christian Ethiopia as well as Muslim-majority societies has been considered 'benign' thanks to the principles of manumission as a recommended act and the legal possibilities to obtain freedom. Apologetic discourses on slavery have been analysed.⁸⁸ This understanding has been challenged by recent scholarship focusing on the violence of enslavement

88 Toledano 1998.

and dislocation,⁸⁹ on the enslavement of Black African Muslims,⁹⁰ something that is not permissible in Islamic law, and on the impact of slavery and gender in the creation of racialized categories in early Islamic history.⁹¹

Slavery in Ethiopia was at times portrayed as a civilizational advancement in Ethiopia's imperial discourse, at other times as a barbaric institution, particularly in anti-Ethiopian propaganda, seeking to hinder Ethiopia's admission to the League of Nations in 1924 by questioning its civilized status and capacity. The following two articles in this section tackle the question of these perceptions, exploring slavery arguments from what can be referred to as *alternative perspectives*. It is important to highlight the alternative character of these arguments when considering that slavery is often debated primarily from a Western colonial standpoint, as seen in travel reports, anti-slavery commission reports, and the vantage point of anti-slavery societies. Giulia Bonacci provides a rare glimpse into how two African American intellectuals, Joel A. Rogers and William E. Steen argued about slavery in Ethiopia, then a beacon of Pan-Africanism. These perspectives expose the often paternalistic and Eurocentric stance of Western reports and observations, yet they also highlight the deep-rooted struggle to reconcile the different forms of slavery in Africa and the complexities of distinguishing them from the Atlantic model with its dehumanizing plantation economy and racial ideology. Bonacci also demonstrates the challenges faced in these debates, particularly the dilemma of presenting counterarguments against slavery without inadvertently aligning with Italian propaganda and the imperialist positions of European colonialists. This discourse lies at the heart of Ethiopia's bid for League of Nations membership, crucial for affirming its status as a civilized nation. Sara Marzagora's chapter unveils another alternative voice, exploring Kābbādā Mika'el's analysis in 'Ethiopia and Western Civilisation (*Ityōpyanna Mə'arabawi šəlatṭane*, 1949)'. It delves into intellectual framing, countering Fascist claims by highlighting Ethiopia's historical stance against slavery. Kābbādā Mika'el portrays Ethiopia not as a barbaric outlier but as part of a lineage of great empires contending with slavery. Marzagora sheds light on slavery's impact on Ethiopian political thought, crucial during and after Italian colonization, when Ethiopia fought the stigma of being portrayed as a country where slavery was ubiquitous in the colonial world. Both chapters remind us of the ideological value attributed to slavery and its abolition as a powerful tool to legitimize imperialist interests, but also of the challenge that African authors faced in reconciling their own moral judgement of slavery with their need to not use colonial arguments to distance themselves from it. Their effort to distinguish transatlantic slavery from forms of slavery taking place in Ethiopia with the

89 See for example Perry 2021 or Barker 2019.

90 Gomez 2018.

91 Urban 2020; Urban 2022.

latter depicted as less cruel exposes how the difficulty of describing forms of slavery beyond the transatlantic model pre-existed this current academic debate.

Neither the Italians nor the other western powers won the fight against slavery. Despite remaining high on Ethiopia's political agenda post-World War II, the British government, seen as exemplary among colonial powers, failed to include new anti-slavery commitments in the treaty acknowledging Ethiopian sovereignty in 1942. This disappointment was shared by the British Anti-Slavery Society, underscoring how, after the war, slavery faded as a political concern. As in other African regions, labour issues gained prominence in policy circles and colonial communities.

Following the gradual decline of slavery, the second section of the Supplement explores the afterlife of slavery in Ethiopia. While the first section explored different perspectives concerning the nature of slavery across Ethiopia in different historical periods and how it was understood and represented in different sources, the second section asks; what is slavery today and how is it experienced by Ethiopians? Positioned at the intersection of historical manifestations and contemporary perceptions, Takele Merid contributes to the debate on the trajectories of slavery. The historical subjugation and enslavement of the Berta people in western Ethiopia have deeply influenced their present socio-economic status, serving as a connecting thread between the past and present. The author suggests that oral data can aid in reconstructing patterns of enslavement, shedding light on the current socio-political conditions of communities. This approach gives visibility to previously nameless slaves in history, highlighting their suffering and trauma. Moreover, the history of slavery offers insights into the politicization of memory in citizen-state perspective and among ethnic groups, impacting present-day socio-political dynamics. Today, descendants of slaves and slave-owners coexist, and social relations remain influenced by past hierarchies.

In Kefyalew Tessema's article, which analyses the boundaries between slave descendants and the descendants of former slave owners, it is observed how political figures try to avoid and silence the stigma of slavery. In its place, they craft the image of an ethnic minority group centred around language and descent. They resist being categorized as a class of former slaves or slave descendants, refraining from acknowledging a collective history. These two chapters serve as a reminder of the multi-faceted legacies and potential instrumentalization of slavery's past and its trajectories.

The concept of post-slavery becomes particularly relevant in the last two chapters of this section. As Dessalegn Amsalu illustrates in his contribution, former slave groups leverage historical injustices to negotiate certain political rights. His chapter discusses the politicization of the memory of slavery and slave raids by the Gumuz, highlighting their feelings of continued marginalization. The past becomes a weapon in the hands of politicians, who threaten the social contract demanding silence on past atrocities. Politicians instrumentalize

past slavery to justify aggression against various non-Gumuz communities, irrespective of the historical accuracies or inaccuracies blurring the dichotomy dividing the perpetrators of slavery and their victims. Thus, slavery and slave raiding become blanket terms encompassing multiple feelings of marginalization, injustices, and otherness. Stigma and dehumanization persist as subtexts to exert power, control land, or confront groups perceived as ‘rebellious’ slave descendants.

However, understanding the enduring impact of slave descent on local social hierarchies presents challenges, as local labels often run contrary to political ascriptions of ethnicity, as demonstrated by Sophie Küspert-Rakotondrainy’s extensive fieldwork in western Oromia. In western Wälläga, societal changes stemming from slavery and labour dynamics have led to the formation of complex social hierarchies. These changes, intertwined with ethnic identities, have resulted in a stratified society marked by traditional and contemporary labels. Küspert-Rakotondrainy focuses on the ‘black Oromo’, a group often associated with slave ancestry. The chapter explores the basis for this categorization and its implications for social status. The research specifically examines the relationship between the Mao people and those identified as descendants of slaves, probing into historical factors shaping this connection and its impact on social hierarchy.

The third section delves into the challenging task of source materials on slavery, particularly when attempting to go beyond the use of Western sources. Lacy Feigh sheds light on the rich potential of archival work, illustrating how prison files and legal sources offer valuable insights into the end of slavery. Despite being largely overlooked, the Ethiopian National Archives and Library Agency (ENALA) houses a trove of records, including those from Emperor Ḥaylā Səllase’s reign to the present day. Through an auto-ethnographic approach, this research highlights the significance of provincial prison records in ENALA for understanding Ethiopia’s abolition of slavery in the mid-twentieth century, providing practical guidance for scholars navigating this archive and its resources.

In the final article, Yonas Ashine takes a novel approach by exploring the development of anti-slavery arguments through literature, offering valuable ethnographic insights into the experiences of enslaved peoples. This chapter not only advocates for innovative sourcing methods but also delves into the history of perceptions surrounding slavery. By examining how abolitionists and intellectuals interpreted historical slavery, Yonas’s contribution provides a fitting conclusion to this collection, bridging the gap between historical scholarship and lived experiences.

The Supplement concludes with a bibliography and a conceptual summary. The bibliography addresses a critical gap in analytical research by acknowledging the scarcity of specialized studies on this topic and highlighting the prevalence of passing references found in various literary works, travel narratives,

historical texts, and ethnographic sources. The bibliography prioritizes substantive contributions, at the minimum a chapter or a defined passage in a text that contributes to the understanding of slavery. We hope this will become an essential resource for researchers and scholars interested in understanding the historical and contemporary realities of slavery in the region. Overall, we hope that this comprehensive bibliography will be a valuable resource for anyone seeking to understand the complex history and contemporary realities of slavery in Ethiopia.

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Part 1

Historical Manifestations and Representations of Slavery

The *Keela*-System as a Defensive Strategy against Slave Raiding in the Kingdom of Dawuro, South-West Ethiopia (c. Sixteenth to Nineteenth Century)

ADMASU ABEBE, TADDESSE BERISSO, AND GETACHEW SENISHAW

Summary

This study explores the *keela* system, the defence wall of the medieval Dawuro kingdom in south-western Ethiopia, between the Goğāb and Omo rivers. The *keela*, operational between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, designated by a dry stone walled was both a border and a tax collection point with a defensive and protective function. This study employs a qualitative, ethnography-based approach. During extensive fieldwork in the region, interviews were carried out with the inventory data of the selected sites of the *keela* recorded via a GPS unit mapping of the current spatial structure of the *keela*. Further to which, available local oral sources were consulted, as well as travel accounts and archival and written materials. The paper examines the purpose of the defensive walls, its fortification, ditches, and the gate system in terms of its importance in the kingdom's history. These findings demonstrate how Dawuro is to be compared with other kingdoms implementing walled borders for defensive purposes, protecting against warfare and slave raids from western Africa, Kenya, and Sudan. The very existence of the *keela*, thwarted expansionists initiatives and denied slave raiders and traders access to the kingdom far into the nineteenth century. Nonetheless, the kingdom was to be violently incorporated into modern Ethiopia in 1893.

Introduction

Strategies of local resistance against slave raids has met with but little study despite the growing literature on the subject of slavery and the slave trade in Africa in general and Ethiopia in particular.¹ Building on West African examples, Sylviane A. Diouf has identified and classified three resistance strategies: defensive strategies, protective strategies and offensive strategies.² Following this typology, the *keela* system studied in this chapter is considered both as a defence strategy and mechanism. This paper asks the following questions: can we improve our conceptualization of the *keela*? What was its social role? Did it impact the people's spiritual practices? Was it always effective in defending the territory and people from slave raiding? To answer these questions, this chapter focuses on the walled kingdom of Dawuro.

1 Bonacci and Meckelburg 2017; 'Slavery', *EAE*, IV (2010), 673a–681b (R. Pankhurst, J. Miran, D. Bustorf, and W. Smidt).

2 Diouf 2003, xix–xxi.

Dawuro was a highly centralized kingdom located in Ethiopia's south-western region, prone to slave raids but was itself involved in slave-trading. The *keela* enclosed the kingdom with elongated defensive dry-stone walls and ditches, numbering three to seven parallel rows. The movement of goods and people was regulated through fixed gateways locally called *miša*.



Figs 1–2 Partial view of the great Dawuro walls/*kati halala keela* (Photo; fieldwork 10 January 2011).

Dawuro reflects the practices of other kingdoms in western Africa, Kenya, and Sudan in as much as they walled their borders for defensive purposes against slave raids and warfare. Slave defence walls are found in the town of

Gwollu in what is today northern Ghana close to the border with Burkina Faso.³ In Sokoto, Nigeria, ‘a landscape of mountains, caves, underground tunnels, and marshes were cleverly used for protection and reinforced with the building of ramparts, fortresses, and other architectural devices and the planting of poisonous and thorny trees and bushes.’⁴ In Kenya, the *gunda-buche* earthworks enclosures were built as defensive walls, likewise in nineteenth-century Sudan, ‘defence walls in densely packed villages, made it very difficult for invading armies to make a quick and successful sweep through the region.’⁵

The data for this chapter was gathered from both written and printed sources as well as interviews carried out during extensive ethnographic fieldwork around the *kati halala keela*, the latter being local terms for the ‘great stone wall’ of Dawuro, and its gateways.⁶ During fieldwork, inventory data of the site was recorded via GPS, and the spatial structure of the *keela* was partly mapped and analysed with GIS software (Arcmap.10.8). Oral history and folktales about the history of slavery and the slave trade and the role of the *keela* were also collected. Archival sources from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as well as accounts by European travellers were consulted in Addis Abäba and at Hamburg University.⁷

Conceptualizing *Keela*⁸

The etymology of the word *keela* is obscure. In Amharic, ‘**ከላ**’ signifies ‘door’. In Oromo, too, ‘*kella*’ is a gate or door ‘that was made through the rampart.’⁹ According to Richard Pankhurst, the word ‘*kella*’ is of Käfa (Omotic) or Sidama

3 Swanepoel 2010, 402.

4 Diouf 2003, xix.

5 Hubbell 2001, 31.

6 Fieldwork was conducted in three phases, from July to September 2019; from March to May 2020; and in May–June 2021.

7 The lead investigator consulted archival sources at the Hiob Ludolf Centre for Ethiopian and Eritrean Studies and the Institute for Asian and African Studies, Hamburg University, Germany (from 1 to 30 November 2019) with the help of the SLAFNET mobility programme. More archival work was carried out at the Institute of Ethiopian Studies (Addis Ababa University, 10–25 October 2019), and at the National Archive and Library Agency (Ethiopia, from 1 to 15 January 2020).

8 In Dawuro language, the term *keela* (here double ‘ee’ to show voice lengthening) is spelled differently from *kella* (here double ‘ll’ show germination, and in Amharic ‘**ከላ**’) referring to customs and security checkpoint. Local speakers use the term *keela* rather than *kella*. But in nineteenth century traveller’s accounts and literature the term *kella* is used. The conceptual orientation of this paper uses the term *keela* to explain its local embedded meaning being attached to traditional defence system.

9 D’Abbadie 1890, 40 and 92.

(Cushitic)¹⁰ origin.¹¹ In the fourteenth century, the Kāfa kingdom also had ‘kelloo’, one of the defensive mechanism at the border, with trenches and gates.¹² Charles Beke referred to *keela* as ‘a gate or pass way’—which is defended by a ditch and a fence, and located between the countries of ‘Ānnarya’ and ‘Nanoo’.¹³ Most sources and studies available, describe the *keela* as a defence and border control or tax point.¹⁴

In Dawuro, the meaning of the term *keela* refers to a defensive system. By adding other terms, the local community extends the meaning of the term *keela*; (1) *woga olla keela*, ‘the great war defence wall’; (2) *olla keela*, ‘the *keela* of the war’; (3) *miša keela*, ‘the gate of the *keela*’; (4) *kati halala keela*, ‘the king Halala *keela*’; (5) *soho keela*, ‘the stone terrace walls protective of soil “erosion”’¹⁵; (6) *bokuwa-keela miša*, ‘the gate of the defensive ditch’; (7) *mitsa keela-qollawu yarshuwa*, ‘possession of ritual for the guardian of the *qolla* spirit who dwells on gates of the *keela*’; (8) *keelay nu shempuwa nageda*, ‘the *keela* safeguarded our lives’. From these local expressions multiple insights into the social embeddedness of the *keela* system appear.

Antoine d’Abbadie mentioned the presence of ‘*qella*’ (*keela*) in various locations across southern Ethiopia in Kāfa, Anfillo, ‘Kullo’ (Dawuro), Ānnarya, Saqa, Ġimma, Gomma, Wällāga, etc.¹⁶ According to Arnold Hodson, each small province had its gate of entry and exit, and all traders passing through these gates were taxed by the local officials.¹⁷

Many observers and travellers noted how these walls, fortification, ditches, and gate systems served multiple purposes in the history of these kingdoms/states. For instance, at the end of the nineteenth century, Oscar Neuman observed the *keela* on the Kāfa and Ġimma border:

Approaching the northern Kella of Kāfa, I found everywhere evidence of the last war with the Abyssinians. Near the road, I saw strong fences and

10 According to Beke (1843, 262), ‘Sidama is a term which is usually applied to Christians in general, although at Baso I have heard it not unfrequently given to people who certainly do not profess our religion; and I have heard it explained as meaning the natives of countries beyond the land of [Oromo], who are of different races and a different language; and slaves from Kaffa, Worotta [Dawuro], [Wālaytta], and appear to be all known in the market as Sidama’s without regard to their religion.’

11 Pankhurst 1968b, 26.

12 ‘Kella’, *EAE*, III (2007), 379a–380b (R. Pankhurst); Zegeye Woldemariam Ambo 2021, 67.

13 Beke 1843, 258.

14 Braukämper 2012; Hodson 1919; Mohammed Hassen 1990; Neumann 1902.

15 Also, Assefa Engdawork and Bork (2014, 932) explained that *keela* in Gamo Cenča highlands are stone-walled terraces used in ‘indigenous sustainable soil conservation technology’.

16 D’Abbadie 1890, 92–110.

17 Hodson 1919, 74.

deep ditches, while the forest was virtually honeycombed with holes about 10 to 12 feet deep, with a pointed stake in the middle of each.¹⁸

Similarly, George Montandon remarked that the *keela* of Ānnarya were: ‘baricades made of cut branches and green trees intertwined by a gate of native fashion hinged on it an upper edge, which [was] raised by day, but let down at night.’¹⁹ Mohammed Hassen adds that the *keela* of Ānnarya and Ġimma were ‘lines of border defence fortified with the physical configuration made up of palisades, ditches, rivers, swamps, and thick forests’. The gates were guarded by a cavalry unit called ‘Abba Kella’ (‘the father of the entrance gate’, in Afaan Oromo). Therefore, Abba Kella controlled people entering the territory, counted merchants and inspected their merchandise, collected the customs, and prevented slaves from escaping.²⁰

According to Richard Pankhurst, the *keelas* were also understood as a vital ‘feudal institution’ connected to a traditional taxation system of the long-distance trade routes in which slaves changed as custom due in kind in every post station.’ He viewed it simply as a ‘customs post or checkpoint or toll station’.²¹ It should be noted, however, that in the early twentieth century, the passing of slaves through *keela* between the Dawuro and Kāfa was strictly prohibited. Oscar Neuman observed that ‘the export of slaves is absolutely forbidden, that of cattle only allowed by permission of the governor. The whole south of Kāfa is one large forest; there is a broad road leading from (the?) *keella* to Andāračča the new capital.’ He adds, ‘their pass was only possible by means of guarded gate called “Kella”, the entire border surrounded by deep ditches and strong fences.’²² Similarly Friedrich Julius Bieber mentioned the gates of *keela* on a road connecting Andāračča with Dawuro and Konta.²³ Moreover, our informant²⁴ of the Dawuro gateways added that collecting tax or customs due at the gate was not common in Dawuro. Its primary goal was to provide security at the border. However, taxation at points of passage was probably introduced after the expansion of long-distance trade to Dawuro at the beginning of the eighteenth century.

18 Neumann 1902, 390.

19 Montandon 1912, 374.

20 Mohammed Hassen 1990, 482.

21 ‘Kella’, *E Ae*, III (2007), 379b–380b (R. Pankhurst), here p. 379b.

22 Neumann 1902, 388.

23 Friedrich Julius Bieber (1920, 308) notes Andāračča was the major trade centre in Kāfa. Bieber recounts all major trade routes connecting Andāračča to Harār via Konta-Dawuro.

24 Interview with Dawuro elder, 27 July 2019. He tells of tax not being collected primarily on gate sites. Taxation emerged later. Instead, the tax was probably collected by the chief of *haša eraša* who was responsible for passing people and their goods assigning skilled individuals for transport who swam the Omo River with the help of inflated goatskins—locally referred to as *ogoruwa*.

ry.²⁵ The *keela* in Käfa or Dawuro similarly one of the border defensive strategies. The difference between the *keela* of Käfa and that of Dawuro was the latter was made up of wide-ranging dry-stone walls with unique local architectural features and ditches. As to the Käfa defensive system, Zegeye Woldemariam mentioned the artificial defensive system of *hiriyoo* (long, deep, and wide dug ditches), *kelloo* (land gate), *kuripo* (hole) all combined with local ecological knowledge thus using insects, landscape, forests.²⁶ Similarly, d'Abbadie mentioned the *keelas* in Dawuro, Limmu, Saqa, and Wälaytta:

Bruce, brother of the ambassador (diplomatic envoy) from Limmu to Kullo [Dawuro], and whom he has visited repeatedly and whose language he speaks, has given me the following itinerary from Saqa to Woxo, capital of the [...] [Wälaytta] [...] number 2 is the qella of Kullo; 3 is the river; Godo is the capital of Kullo; 5 is inside Kullo; 6 is in Gaba; Kindo is in Walamo; number 10 is an Oromo country. Between Disa and Kindo one crosses the Omo which flows to the right.²⁷

This shows the extent of *keela*'s systems across south-west Ethiopia. In this regard, Charles Beke's sketch map shows the distribution of *keela* and Dawuro as shown in Fig. 3.

All in all, *keela* is best conceptualized as a local defensive system or set of strategies defined in relation to the political, territorial, and economic history of the kingdoms that established it. Moreover, the meaning of *keela* should not be limited only to the gate system. As discussed above, the major components of *keela* include border walls/fortifications or ditches, gateways, spatial knowledge of the border landscape, and the social organization of border-keeping strategies.

25 Seid Ahmed Mohammed 2007, 45.

26 Zegeye Woldemariam Ambo 2021, 56.

27 D'Abbadie 1890, 93 (translation by the author).

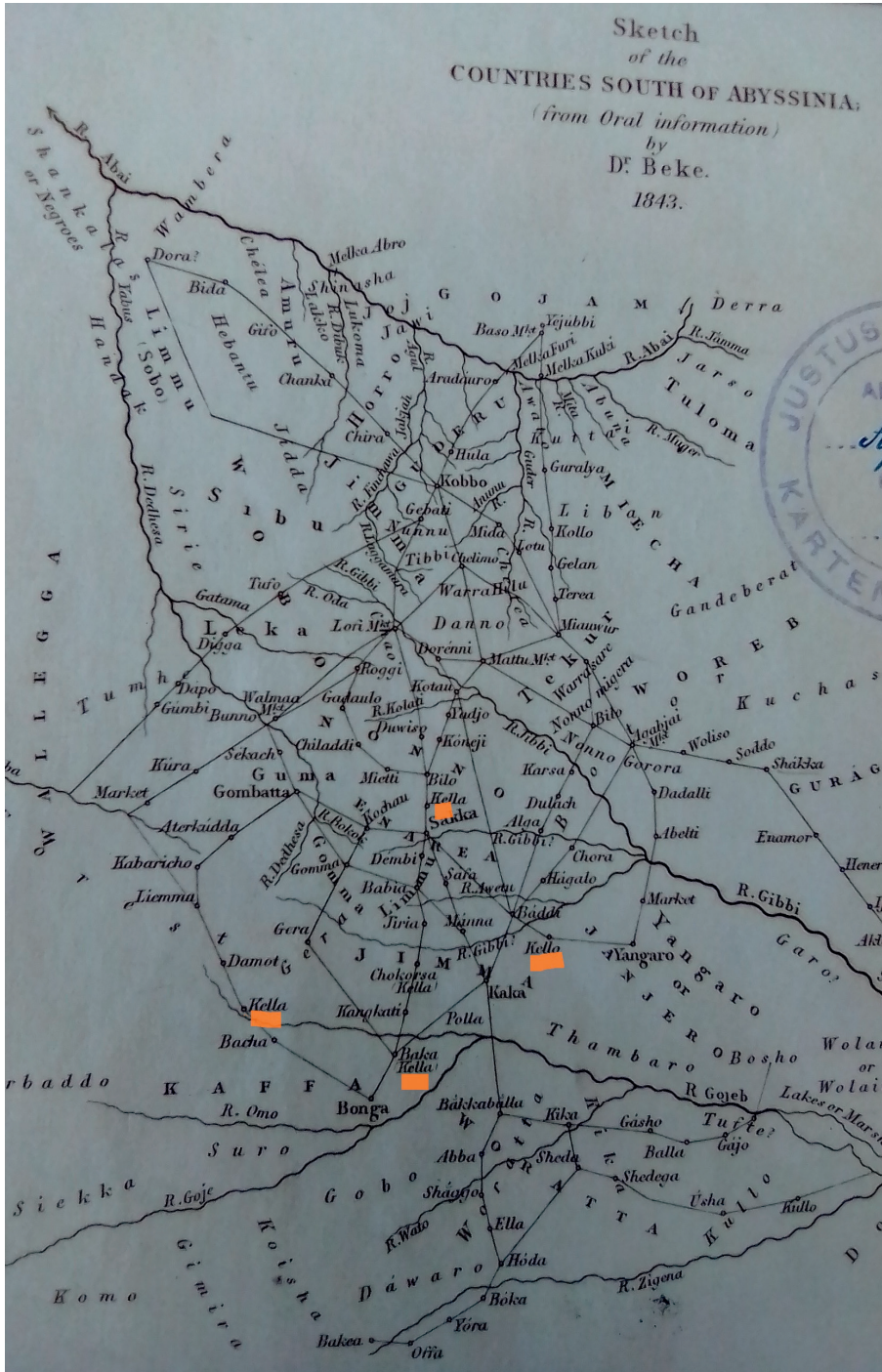


Fig. 3 Map of Dawuro and *keela* system (yellow shaded) in south-west Ethiopia nineteenth century (source: Beke 1843, Gotha Perthes map collection).

Dawuro: The Walled Kingdom

Dawuro was one of the earliest unified kingdoms in the Omo valley before the eleventh century.²⁸ It remained as a highly centralized, independent kingdom between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries under the *kawuka* dynasty rule.²⁹ It had a fixed political centre at *koyiša kati gad'uwa* (royal palace) in present-day Disa *wārāda*. The kingdoms' power was organized hierarchically in seven socio-political strata descending from the king to the people (*katiya*, *woraba*, *eraša*, *guuda*, *daana*, *huuduga*, *d'uğa*).³⁰ As Beke's sketch map above shows, various names were used to identify Dawuro: 'Woratta', 'Kullo', Dawro, 'Dauro', and 'Dawaro'.³¹

Dawuro society is hierarchically organized in the '*heza na'a*' ('the son of three'). *Heza na'a* signifies the three main lineage clusters of clans named as *malaa*, *dogola* and *amhaaraa*.³² Under each main cluster, there were sub-cluster grouped in *k'omo* (clanship). There are more than 290 *k'omos*. Dawuro identity is tied to membership in a *k'omuwa* and/or a *heza na'a* group. Dawuro society consists of farmers who constitute the majority, and occupational groups, namely potters (*mana*), blacksmiths (*wogačiya*), tanners (*dānča*), and charcoal producers, and to some degree farmers and the hunters (*manğa*).³³ Dawuro was a source of valuable trade items such as ivory, cattle, coffee, spices, skins, hides, honey, and slaves. In return, *amole* (salt bars), beads, iron, and other commodities were imported to Dawuro. Dawuro was connected to long-distance trade routes.³⁴ Trade routes ran to Andāračča, Bonga (Kāfa), Ğirān (Ğimma), Basso, Galabat to the west. To the east, Dawuro was connected to the trade routes of Hadiyya, Alaba, Arsi, Bale-Harār, Zayla/Barbera ports.

28 Wondimu Lema and Mulugeta Bezabh 2011/2012, 81.

29 Data Dea 1997, 11; Seid Ahmed Mohammed 2007, 41; Wondimu Lema and Mulugeta Bezabh 2011/2012, 81.

30 The hierarchy of seven political offices were defined by title implying in descending order as *katiya/kati* (king, first office), *woraba* (chief of provinces, second office), *eraša* (chief of sub-provinces, third office), *gudaa* (fourth office), *dana* (fifth offices), *hunduga* (sixth office) and *d'uğa* (seventh office). Aside from the king's position all other offices were based on competition and limited time intervals (Data Dea 1997, 10).

31 Notes, in the literature, the names 'Dawuro', 'Dauro', 'Dawaro', 'Dawro', and 'Kullo' have been used by different authors to refer to the zone and the society. But zone administration officials, native writers and some linguists use 'Dawuro', therefore, as in this chapter, the name 'Dawuro' is used (Admasu Abebe 2014, 17).

32 Interview with Dawuro elder, 21 March 2020.

33 Data Dea 1997; Wondimu Lema and Mulugeta Bezabh 2011/2012.

34 Seid Ahmed Mohammed 2007, 45.



The Dawuro kingdom established the *keela* system as a territorial defence system between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries.³⁵ Regarding the age of the walls, detailed archaeological studies have, as yet, not been made. However, an ‘Interim archaeological impact assessment’ report of Gibe III dam shows the walls might have been built between the sixteenth and eighteenth century.³⁶ Oral sources indicate the Dawuro society built *keela* in response to multiple threats such as the wars of *Imām* Aḥmad ibn Ibrāhīm al-Ġāzī, wars of territorial expansions, and intermittent wars with neighbouring kingdoms. The *keela* has a cluster of three to seven rows of dry stones walls that stretches from the kingdom’s north-west direction eastwards to its southern part on the right banks of the Goḡāb and Omo rivers valleys. Each row of walls has 1.8 to 4 meters height, 3 to 7 meters width, and is approximately 170 to 200 km long.³⁷ The *keela* con-

37 Admasu Abebe 2014, 29; Hailu Zeleke 2007–2008, 408.

struction was finalized by King Halala (1775–1835) hence the local terms *kati halal keela*.

Over the centuries, the *keela* played a significant role in the survival of the Dawuro kingdom and society. Slave raiders, cattle raiders (locally named *goldiya*, a seasonal pastoralist cattle raider from South Omo from the Bodi group specifically),³⁸ and enemy armies had no direct access to the kingdom thanks to the *keela*. As with other kingdoms in south-west Ethiopia, Dawuro was also affected by slave raids. The oral sources in Dawuro recount catastrophic slave raids under the despotic Šəpənu (ሸፉኑ) regime of Ənnarya during the first half of sixteenth century.³⁹ Šəpənu/Šipinihi was a major slave raider in service of the Christian empire. Presumably a Portuguese soldier who ruled the Ənnarya kingdom after the expeditions of *Imām* Aḥmad ibn Ibrāhīm al-Ġāzī. Originally a '[h]ighly reliable and successful conqueror soldier in service to the northern Ethiopian Empire', he was probably appointed by Claudius (1540–1559) to rule the conquered Hinnarrio/Ənnarya land (1530–1570), and he later conquered Boša, Kāfa, Šeka, Anfillo, and part of Dawuro.⁴⁰ From these lands, Šipinihi provided gold and slaves for Sārša Dəngəl (1555–1589), a Christian highland ruler in northern Ethiopia. Dawuro elders remember that 'Šəpənu was a most oppressive king who lived in the direction of Kāfa, but he was neither Kāfa king nor Šeka nor from Dawuro. Before our fourth generation, our ancestors started to dig the ditches and built the *keela* to protect themselves from an oppressive king.'⁴¹ There is a famous saying related to the oppressive king, that echoes oral history: 'Šəpənu *agena* *Dono Gogena*',⁴² which means 'as *Dono* Lake never discharge like a river, Šəpənu never allows you to be free' (in Amharic የዶኖ ሐይቅ አይፈስም ፤ ሸፉኑንም ሰውን አይለቅህም).⁴³

Hereby, the *keela*'s role in protecting from slave raids and providing a defensive warfare system was illustrated by one informant as '*kasse assa torayika wod'i u'gee, shamayika ungee [...] keelay bawentto assay wuree*', meaning 'in ancient time, before the *keela* was built, our ancestors were killed by wars, they were taken away by raiders for the slave trade, and hence our country was de-

38 *Goldiya* or *golde* or *golda* are Omotic designations of Surmic-speaking lowland agro-pastoralists, particularly the Bodi who live in the lower Omo valley west of the Dime land. The raiders were not only *goldiya* but also central highlanders.

39 On Šipinihi in the oral traditions of Hinnarrio, see Lange 1982, 30–33.

40 Lange 1982, 25 and 30–31.

41 Notes from interview with Dawuro elder, 3 April 2020.

42 Interview with Dawuro elder, 3 April 2020.

43 On the oral traditions, background and identity discourse of Šipinihi, see Lange (1982, 30–33). In the Šeka oral source 'Šipinihi was considered as "father of evil"'. This could provide a clue on the joint slave extraction of Portuguese (Šipinihi) and Christian highlanders from south-west Ethiopia.

populated. So, the *keela* was built to protect our ancestors from enslavement and wars.⁴⁴ The defensive capability of *keela* included the following elements:

- 1) The natural landscape (rivers, caves, mountains, forests);
- 2) The construction of strong walls/ditches along its entire border;
- 3) Establishing fixed gateways and a security maintenance system;
- 4) An alarm system through the beating a big drum (locally referred to as *gommiya*) to warn of intruders.



Fig. 5 Partial map of the *keela* of Dawuro kingdom shows the spatial structure of the *keela* in Zima Waruma *qābāle* on the Wälaytta frontier (source: Researcher's GIS-based inventory fieldwork 2021).

44 Interview with Dawuro elder, 7 August 2019.



Fig. 6 One of the gateways (Garada *miša*) of the border *keela* located at Garada Entala *qābāle*. Fieldwork photo 2011.

As noted above, the *keela* has three to seven dry stone walls and ditches. In strategic sites along the walls were seven main, guarded gateways. According to field observation, the *keela* is a group of buildings structured in advance of military defensive strategy implementing landscape features. Remarkably, the *keela* system relied on local spatial and topographical knowledge. The following map shows part of the spatial structure of the Dawuro Great Wall at the frontier with Wālaytta on the right side of the Omo River (now the Gibe III hydroelectric dam reservoir).

The *keela* defensive system was carefully instituted through socio-spatial analysis of the border landscape, for instance, by connecting the historical route of possible crossing points (*pinuwa*) of the Omo River directly at gateways of the border control system. The gateways were also built on challenging topographical landscapes such as steep hills or mountaintops to provide obvious defence advantages during in the event of an attack.

The chief of the Goğāb and Omo rivers (*hasta eraša*) and the chief of the gate (*miša eraša*) controlled the movement of people and goods around the border areas. On border security issues, the chief of the rivers and the chief of the gates worked hand-in-hand. The chief of the gates nominated able youths (*mištawu k'od'eda lakaytuwa*) to guard the gates in daily rotation. One man kept a gate by day. Boundary security was checked every night by the drum beatings; there

were two drums, namely, the dinner drum and the war drum. Any attempt to enter the kingdom outside the formal gate was illegal.

Moreover, the gateways were also spiritual empowered ritual sites, as the people believed a guardian spirit dwelled on the gate (*miša qolla*). The gates were annually ritualized (*miša qollaw yarshuwa*), to enable the guardian spirit to protect the borders and territory from intangible and invisible spiritual enemies. After surrendering on the battlefield, war captives took an oath to become slaves and subsequently underwent a ritual at the gate of *keela* before inclusion with as members of society. The ritual at the gate of *keela* had two purposes; first to cherish public appreciation for champion soldiers who brought ample war captives (*omoduwa*—including people, cattle, weapons), the second, was that of the war captives' oath taking, named *gondoruwa*. The latter consisted of a blood oath not to kill or harm war captives from the battlefield. This is how our informant remembered the *gondoruwa* on the gate and the integration of war captives in Dawuro:⁴⁵

After surrendering on battlefield, the options for war captives were death or escaping. According to our tradition war captive make an oath called *gonduruwa* to become war slave. At battlefield, captives immediately began to beg the champion soldier by saying, 'Please do not kill me, I will be your slave, I work for you, I gather grasses for your cattle, I pitch water to your horse, hereafter make me your slave, but do not kill me (*tana haraa wod'ufa*). I promise you by *gondoruwa*.' It is said to be *gondoruwa* when the captive of war cuts his breast and transfers the drops of blood with his finger and places the blood from his finger on the tongue of the victorious soldier so that he licks it off and thus makes a promise with blood, an oath that is demonstrated both in words and in deeds. While making a promise, the captive says, 'I will not attack you hereafter, if I do similar action again, let my child not grow, let our blood become the blood of the God, I cut my breast by knife which have no milk and now I am feeding you a blood. I make a promise by blood and do not kill me.' Hence, the captives partook of the ritual at the gates and became *olla ayliya* (slave of war). This was called *gondoruwa*. Killing of captives at the battlefield before they took the blood promise or crossing the gate was not a sin, but the killing of captives after *gondoruwa* incurred a *gome* (curse).

Thereafter, through *gondoruwa*, captives (*haretada assa*) became the *olla ayliya* (i.e. slaves of war). This ritual dedicated to the slaves of war at the gate was believed to clean them from any enemy behaviour before inclusion into their society. Many attended the ritual ceremony at the gate. After which the

45 Interview with Dawuro elder Demba Bola *qābāle*, 28 July 2019.

captive's identity, name, and social status were changed and made known to all members of the society; these persons were thereafter considered as members of the society with the status of war slave. As our informant remembered, 'as one cannot put the serpent in his/her pocket, you cannot bring your enemy to your home without *gondoruwa*.'⁴⁶ This ritual granted security to the society and prohibited the potential danger related to the presence of war captives who could engage in spying on the community for their homeland. In this way, *keela* serves an important social role through which insiders and outsiders are publicly defined, whereas the ritual called *gondoruwa* marked the transformation of the social status of war captives, from 'free man' to war slave upon crossing the *keela*.

This transformation of status was relevant also for northern traders. As oral poetry reveals, the *keela* system forced northern traders to live in Dawuro either with a social status of a free man or that of a slave. 'ባሪያ ገዛው ብዬ ባሪያ ሆኑኩልኸ ከላውም ተዘጋ አዋም ሞላልኸ'⁴⁷, meaning, 'I came to this country [Dawuro] to buy slaves but the guards at the gate of *keela* and the fullness of Omo forced me to become a slave'.

The Impact of *Keela* on Slave Raiding

When slave demand reached its apex in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the defensive strategies of *keela* had gradually been weakened. It has been noted that after two centuries of continuous warfare, the resistance of the small south-western kingdoms were broken. Additionally, from the late eighteenth century until the late-nineteenth-century unification of Ethiopia, southern and south-western Ethiopia remained in a continuous state of conflict.⁴⁸ The *keela* had protected the kingdom of Dawuro, but, by then, other strategies had been devised exposing the kingdom to more and more slave raids. Raiders foreign to Dawuro established secret alliances with local intermediaries, dubbed *essuwa*. The role of *essuwa* was to gather information and facilitate the strategy of raiders arriving from distant areas. They had secret watching sites named *ayile wočuwa* that were located below the walls of *keela* in the deep Omo gorges.⁴⁹ The slave routes along the Omo River were named *ayile yed'o pinuwa* (slave crossing sites on the Omo River). These sites were located far away from the main gateways and formal (or protected) roads. *Essuwa* did not help raiders cross through main gateways such as Daramisa *miša*/Dangarsa *pinuwa*, Dara

46 Interview with Dawuro elder, 28 July 2019.

47 Interview with Dawuro elder, 13 January 2011.

48 Abir 1965, 205–206. Notes, see his map on page 206, on which Kullo (Dawuro) is indicated.

49 Interview with Dawuro elder, 29 July 2019. He mentioned the site located, in his *qābāle* near the Gibe III dam between Dawuro and Wālaytta border.

miša, Garada *miša*. Informants⁵⁰ gave two reasons for this: firstly, the strict gatekeeping system; they would have been stopped by gatekeepers. Secondly the gateways were prayer (*shik'ee*) sites dedicated to *miša qolla* (the guardian spirit who dwell on the gate) and it was a taboo to break the spiritual rules by crossing with raiders. Such a breach was believed to invoke a *gome* (curse). While the community members crossed the gateways, they prayed for protection against slave raiders, and when they returned peacefully, they gave thanks to the guardian spirit for the protection granted. Due to their fear of such guardian spiritual power that rested by the gates, the *essuwa*, or internal slave raiders did not pass the gateways. Instead, they made another *pinuwa*, a way exclusively used to take captives away, named *ayile yed'o pinuwa* (e.g. one located in Ad-disu Bodor *qābāle*, Loma Bosa *wārāda*). Informants remember that the internal slave raiders brought kidnapped people to such sites at night, but the raiders from outside (foreign raiders) never crossed the Omo and the *keelas*. It appears that once a family had been taken away as captive, stories were constructed and propagated to their immediate neighbours; it was said '*baludiya*' ate them.⁵¹

Baludiya was conceived as half-human and half-wild animal creature possessed with an evil spirit that eats human beings in the night. *Baludiya*'s sex is female. She lives in forests and goes out during the dark night. If the entire family members dwelling near the forest disappear overnight, without any sign (with no remains like blood, bone), it was said that they were eaten by the *baludiya*. And, if this information was disseminated swiftly in the community, that they were eaten by the *baludiya*, there was no way to find them.

Such a story seems consciously and tactically constructed by *essuwa*, the internal slave raiders' middlemen, who may actually have been close neighbours of the disappeared family. The objective of such a story of an external entity or a giant creature was to close the possibility of further investigation about the disappearance of people. The story of families eaten by *baludiya* or the repulsive character of *baludiya* creatures was repeated within households. Mothers taught their child to come home in time before sundown from the market and various activities (cattle grazing, water pitching, grass and wood collection sites); otherwise, *baludiya* would eat them. It may have also been a way of teaching children self-protection to prevent being kidnapped by slave raiders.

All this happened at a time when 'the increased demand for slaves led to extensive slave raiding, resulting in the breakdown of law and order and a considerable exodus of population.'⁵² By comparing the Dawuro population who had

50 Interview with Dawuro elders, 29 July 2019.

51 Interview with Dawuro elder, 3 April 2020.

52 Seid Ahmed Mohammed 2015, 85.

once built hundreds of kilometres of border walls with the current Dawuro population, some informants suggest that the Dawuro became increasingly depopulated due to the impact of the nineteenth century slave raids.⁵³ Slave raiding impacted the demography of Dawuro, as well as their settlement pattern. In this regard, one of our informants who lived near the three rows of ditches and its gateway named Doje Phata Mitsa in Manta *qābāle* on the border of Konta narrated the following:

There was a prominent *miša eraša* (the chief of the gate) named *Alama Santamo*. Santamo was a religious man and the authorized person to ritualize the gate. When the raids and assaults come from Kāfa and Konta, the drum was beaten to inform the king at Koysha palace to mobilize defence forces. The remnant of such drum and war spears still exist in the park. At an early time, the illegal crossing of those ditches from Konta to Dawuro vis-à-vis caused immediate enslavement. Later, when Santamo died, his sons were raided by slave raiders. They were taken to Konta, then to Ğimma, from Ğimma to Addis Abāba, finally to an Arab country. We were informed that one of his sons named Bilate Santamo lived in an Arab country. Gradually many people disappeared and what used to be the settlement area turned into a forest. We were pushed to settle on the mountain site. Now, the government demarcated the forest as Chabara Churuchura National Park.⁵⁴

Similarly, another informant⁵⁵ portrayed how slave raiders depopulated one of the sites of the formerly strictly controlled gate of Dara *miša*, in Gena *wārāda* along the border of Hadiyya and Kāmbata-Tsambaro Zones:

In ancient times, there was *gubayiya zaliya*, which means ‘slave trade’. This is how it worked: raiders (locally named as *gadaa/panga*) come at night and raid the entire family and sell them to slave traders. Look, this entire forest below us used to be full of human settlements. Part of the people who lived down this slope were sold as slaves by raiders. Most of them were sold to the Limmu or Ğimma kingdoms. I have met the descendants of former slaves at Limmu, who recall that they come from Toča and Mella. They remember that as their forefather’s clan (*k’omuwa*) is Aygura, their land was Mella and it was located near the marketplace named Woga Geya. Most of them changed their names; someone I knew in Limmu who was from Toča was named Abba Lenča (Oromo name). They told me that they were sold when their fa-

53 Interview with Dawuro elder, 8 August 2019.

54 Interview with Dawuro elder, 4 April 2020.

55 Interview with Dawuro elders, 7 August 2019.

ther died. The raiders took away two brothers, with their mother and one sister. They now live in Bamo town on the way to Limmu-Gännät/Siltu. Two brothers were very rich; one was named Abba Lenča and the other was named Abba Moga.

The above two quotes show how people who dwelled in the border areas of Dawuro were extracted by slave raiders and how the *keela* defensive strengths had become weakened over time.⁵⁶ Similarly, Seid Ahmed underlined that with the intensification of the slave trade, agricultural productivity declined, drought and epidemic disease rapidly expanded and affected most Dawuro people at the beginning of the nineteenth century.⁵⁷ He adds

The slave trade also contributed a lot to the weakness of the state. It brought also the coming of many organized slave raiders in the area. They fought many wars for raiding which extremely affected the social lives of the people. The slave raiders had strong power and raided many localities in Dawuro. Along with the slave-raiding the regional lords organized their armies and began to challenge the kings in the subsequent year. As a result of such factor, Dawuro became weaker than ever before on the eve of incorporation.⁵⁸

Following the decline of the kingdom, its political and military border defence organization became weaker as the gate keepers became involved in slave raiding. Hence, local slave raiders emerged, who cooperated with provincial rulers. In this regard, Seid Ahmed mentioned that Dazu Darota, one of the gate keepers, had close contact with neighbours from Konta, Mallo, and Gofa, and gave tribute to the Dawuro king from the profit he made on trading slaves.⁵⁹ It is also reported that Dazu Darota was one of the gatekeepers at the gate Yeli *miša* in south-eastern Dawuro and, after capturing enemies who had entered illegally through the gate, sold them as slaves.⁶⁰ According to Seid Ahmed, on the eve of Dawuro's incorporation into the Ethiopian empire by Emperor Mənilək II, Dawuro weakened, and the society became insecure due to political problems and secession within the royal family and the emergence of organized slave raiders.⁶¹

56 This quote also indicates those captives had become rich, which might be due to the abolition of slavery in the imperial period when ex-slaves were freed. Later on the land-redistribution policy of *Därg* in 1975, may have made them land owners and attain a degree of wealth.

57 Seid Ahmed Mohammed 2007, 53.

58 Ibid.

59 Ibid., 47.

60 Wondmu Lema and Mulugeta Bezabh 2011, 121.

61 Seid Ahmed Mohammed 2007, 52–56.

After the conquest of the Dawuro kingdom through wars waged by Emperor Mənilək's general, *Ras Wäldä Giyorgis* in 1889, the *keela* defensive strategies were overcome. During the war, the gatekeepers were killed by conquerors equipped with modern weapons and the gatekeeping system was removed. According to oral sources,⁶² the forces of Mənilək II entered Dawuro from two directions. One was led by *Ras Wäldä Giyorgis* from Ğimma, by breaking the *keela* of Abba Garga gate, with the objective of occupying the Dawuro highland. The other was from Gamo-Gofa, with the objective to occupy the lowlands along the Omo River gorge starting from Disa-Šota-Zima areas. This war was led by Baču, thereby it is recalled as 'Baču Olla'. In this war, uncountable people were killed, entire settlements were plundered, some people were captured, and others were exiled to Wälaytta.

As Jon R. Edwards portrayed, after the disruptive wars of expansion to south, the emperor's generals brought thousands of slaves home to Šäwa from their expedition.⁶³ Likewise *Ras Wäldä Giyorgis*, his soldiers and officers were interested in enslaving war captives on the battlefield. Consequently, thousands of war captives from Dawuro were turned into slaves and deployed to Bonga, from Bonga to Benč, from Benč to Gondär⁶⁴ in order to serve *Ras Wäldä Giyorgis* and to break any resistance in Dawuro. As a result, numerous Dawuro people moved from Dawuro and their descendants are still settled in Benč, Tepi, and Gondär. Our informant⁶⁵ remembers that, after the surrender of the territory, the soldiers of *Ras Wäldä Giyorgis* raided people, cattle, and ivory and also imposed a heavy tax on the farmers.⁶⁶ If farmers were unable to pay taxes, they had to pay tribute with children, a practice called '*yäləğ-gəbər*'.⁶⁷ In this regard, our informant told the story of a boy named Dubala Biru.⁶⁸ Dubala Biru became a slave of *Ras Wäldä Giyorgis* at the age of 6 (1910). When *Ras Wäldä Giyorgis* shifted from Kāfa to Gondär, Dubala went to Gondär with *Ras Wäldä Giyorgis*, there he was Christianized and attended military training. Later he participated as a soldier in the Battle of Sägalä (1916), he worked in the Ethio-Djbouti rail-

62 Interview with Dawuro elders, 18 May 2021.

63 Edwards 1982, 5.

64 Interview with Dawuro elder, 4 December 2021. He notes the other woman was *Geni* (empress) Šašote, the mother of the last king of Dawuro, *Kati Kanša*, later Christianized and named Ḥaylä Šəyon. After her son was detained in Šäwa she reorganized her soldiers against the forces of *Ras Wäldä Giyorgis* in 1889–1893. However, *Ras Wäldä Giyorgis* reopened the war from Kāfa and the Šašote army was defeated in 1893. Soon, she was moved to Maği and then to Gondär.

65 Interview with Dawuro elder, 4 December 2021.

66 Notes from Pankhurst 1968a, 75 shows at a time *Ras Wäldä Giyorgis* had 20,000 slaves that equivalent to Emperor Mənilək II and Empress Taytu owned slaves at Addis Abāba.

67 See also the paper by Takele Merid on Berta in this Supplement.

68 Interview with Dawuro elder, Hawassa, 4 December 2021.

way (1922–1928), and he was the first Omotic bible translator and pioneer native protestant missionary worker with the Sudan Interior Mission (SIM) from 1928 to 1991).⁶⁹ At this time, slave traders aligned themselves with local slave raiders named *gubayia zalanča*.⁷⁰ *Gubayia* is a practice that refers to all participants in the trade chain in captives, from the recruitment and raiding up to the marketing process. Our informants remembered that the *gubayia* was introduced to Dawuro during the reign of Emperor Mənilək II and practiced up to the end of Empress Zäwditu's time (i.e. 1889–1930).⁷¹ The *gubayia* slave raids were conducted by individuals or small groups of bandits. Their targets were women and children. They were kidnapped while alone and engaged in farming, rearing livestock, fetching water, or collecting grass and woods. After kidnapping, the raider inserts clothes locally called *k'ačina* in the mouth to force the person to keep quiet. A thief who stole a person in this mode was called *gubayia panga*. Then, the *gubayia panga* smuggles the raided people away from the *keela* and gathers in the Omo River gorge. For instance, there was a place named Dunkiya Demba, located after four parallel rows of the walls of the Halala *keela* in Zima Waruma *qäbäle*, now submerged by the Gibe III dam reservoir. From there, the *gubayia zalanča* (slave trader) retrieved the captives and sold them at markets further away in Wälaytta. After which captives were taken and resold in various markets along the trade route: from Wälaytta to Kuča, from Kuča to Gofa, from Gofa to Boloso, from Boloso to Tambaro, from Tambaro to Arsi, from Arsi to Harär, etc. In this regard, the informant talked of the involvement of Baču (one who conquered lowland area) in slave trade as follows:⁷²

Baču was the prominent *gubayia zalanča*. After raiding, he cut the hair [of the person]; he changed the name and *qomuwa* (clan name) of the raided people to impose forgetfulness of their original homeland. Hence, he sold raided people at Wälaytta, Gamo and Gofa markets. There was a proverb about him saying '*assa bayiza Baču*' (Baču who sold human being). We all are human, but because some sell humans for money, then some people are called *ayliya*, slave.

The purpose of these practices along the slave trade route was to anonymize the regional and family origins of the enslaved people, usually women and children. Therefore, it would be impossible for them to trace back their origins after

69 Balisky 1995, 1.

70 *Gubayia* comes from an Amharic term meaning market (*ገበያ*). *Zalanča* mean trader; *zalia* means trade, *gubayia zalia wode*, means 'during the era of slave trade'; *gubayia zalanča* means 'trader of slave in the market' (notes, interview with Dawuro elders, July–August 2019).

71 Interview with Dawuro elders, 7 August 2019.

72 Interview with Dawuro elder, 27 July 2019.

having been sold numerous times. People who lived on the outskirts of the Omo River gorge were very vulnerable to such slave raids. One informant remembered that at those times *keela* played a critically important role in protecting inhabitants by limiting the mass entering of external raiders through the main gates and crossing *pinuwas* routes on the Omo River during the rainy season.⁷³

Conclusion

This study explored various aspects of the *keela* as a local defensive strategy against slave raiding in the Dawuro kingdom. At the Dawuro kingdom's height, the *keela* was an effective border defensive system playing a significant role in times of warfare and slave raids. Border walls and fortifications or ditches with fixed gateways played a central importance in those societies and show how those communities defended themselves and protected their livelihoods. As such, these societies were not 'defenceless inhabitants'⁷⁴ as has been argued earlier. Nonetheless, the region remained 'a principal source of slaves'⁷⁵, where 'slaves were easily produced.'⁷⁶ This is mainly due to the increased demand in slaves during the nineteenth century and the continuous pressure exercised by raiders and attackers on the region, while the power of regional kingdoms weakened, and the *keela* defence system became increasingly fragile. In Africa, the process of producing captives was always the result of violent conflicts, raids, irregular warfare, and kidnapping, that was essentially destructive and ends in social violence.⁷⁷ In this regard, like in other parts of Ethiopia and elsewhere in Africa, slavery was institutionalized in Dawuro in association with the expansion of various trades. When the region became the source of long-distance trade items (coffee, ivory, and slaves), *keela* checkpoints gradually shifted from being border protection to becoming trade control posts. Regarding the role of the *keela* in Dawuro, further comparison with *keelas* in Käfa, Ğimma, Gomma, and Limmu Ğnnarya could contribute to our understanding of construction specificities and the social and political role of defensive systems in the region of south-western Ethiopia. By and large, the *keela* defensive system in Dawuro bear a broad comparison with west African kingdoms' that also walled their borders for defensive purposes against slave raids and warfare (e.g. in Nigeria, Ghana, Burkina Faso, Sudan, Kenya). Thus, as a case study, the *keela* system taken as historical heritage could contribute to a more comprehensive discussion of traditional African resistance strategies against slave raids.

73 Interview with Dawuro elders, 29 July 2019.

74 Pankhurst 1968a, 87.

75 Ibid., 85 and 111.

76 Seid Ahmed Mohammed 2007, 47; Seid Ahmed Mohammed 2015, 87

77 Rodney 1973, 104.

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Slavery by the Books: References to Slavery in Fifteenth- to Sixteenth-Century Ethiopian Texts

DAVID B. SPIELMAN

Summary

Slavery has a protracted and complex history in Ethiopia and the broader Horn of Africa/Red Sea region. Despite the well-documented involvement in the global slave trade, Ethiopia has received far less critical attention than other regions on the African continent. In the Ethiopian context, the institution of slavery was historically deeply influenced by religion. This article examines slavery as referenced in fifteenth- to sixteenth-century Christian and Muslim texts with the goal of gaining a better understanding of slavery in Christian and Muslim societies across Ethiopia during this time. Relying on a close reading of chronicles, legal and hagiographical sources, a few examples are drawn upon to illustrate the persistence of slavery over time, as well as the role of religion in constructing identities of the enslaved and the free.

Introduction

The institution of slavery has a protracted and complex history in Ethiopia and the broader Horn of Africa/Red Sea region. From Antiquity, the Horn of Africa/Red Sea region was widely known for its slave markets as well as societies and polities that practiced slavery. Inscriptions dating back to the third millennium BCE indicate that the ancient Egyptians regularly conducted trade for various commodities, including enslaved peoples, with a polity they referred to as Punt, thought to be located somewhere in the Horn of Africa.¹ *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* notes that slaves were shipped from the Gulf of Aden, and Pliny noted that the Aksumite port of Adulis functioned as a market for slaves. Slaves originating in the Horn of Africa and Ethiopia in particular were widely known and sought after in the Middle East and the Indian Ocean world.²

Despite the well-documented involvement in the global slave trade, the Horn of Africa and Ethiopia have been given far less critical attention than other regions on the African continent. Studies on slavery, especially in the Atlantic Ocean world, are often centered on questions of race and racialization and its

1 From c.2500 BCE, the Egyptians considered the Horn of Africa as a main source for luxury trade items including myrrh, electrum, and enslaved peoples among others. The exact location of Punt has been widely debated, it is widely accepted that the society was located somewhere in the Horn of Africa region, and specifically recent archaeological studies point to the northern Horn of Africa in modern-day Sudan, Eritrea, and Ethiopia. Cf. Phillips 1997.

2 Hussein Ahmed 2000, 15.

role in justifying the practice.³ In the Ethiopian context, religion played an important role in slavery.⁴ Christianity and Islam were historically practiced throughout Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa in general, and polities associated with these faiths participated heavily in the capture and selling of humans as slaves. This article provides a general analysis of slavery as it appears in texts and legal theories of Christianity and Islam with the goal of gaining a better understanding of slavery in fifteenth- to sixteenth-century Christian and Muslim groups across Ethiopia.⁵ Relying mainly on a reading of chronicles and legal sources a few examples will be drawn in order to illustrate the persistence of slavery across the time period, as well as the role of religion in constructing identities of the enslaved and the free people.

Slavery in Christian Texts

Christianity has long been a part of the religious and political landscape of the Horn of Africa starting with the fourth-century Aksumite king Ezana who declared Christianity the state religion circa 330 CE. Aksum was a powerful Horn of Africa kingdom which covered portions of the Red Sea coast in modern-day Eritrea, all the way into the Təgray region of northern Ethiopia. Since the time of Ezana, Christian influence spread through the Horn of Africa and polities that professed, mainly Miaphysite Christianity dominated the region for the better part of 2000 years.⁶ Prior to the expansion of Christianity and after its rise to prominence, slavery has remained a common institution. Despite the dominant position in the Horn of Africa of the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia very little attention has been given to the kingdom's involvement in the global slave trade. In a large portion of the literature on the topic, much of the responsibility for slavery in the Horn of Africa has been assigned to Muslim sultanates, which from the Middle Ages controlled many of the slave trading markets and Red Sea ports in the Horn of Africa. However, Muslims are a convenient screen with

3 Bennett 2019; Morgan 2021; Johnson 2020.

4 For more on race and slavery in the 'Abrahamic faiths' see Goldenberg 2004; Goldenberg 2017.

5 Customary law of the numerous ethnic groups in Ethiopia accounted for the major body of law in Ethiopia for centuries and was often applied alongside Christian and Muslim law; see Abera Jembere 1998.

6 Miaphysite Christianity, in the case of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tāwəḥədo Church (EOTC), is based upon a rejection of the Christological formula defined at the Council of Chalcedon and the acceptance of the Christological formula of St Cyril of Alexandria. The EOTC takes this formula very seriously 'and so the church calls herself "Tewahedo Church", meaning a church that strongly believes in the perfect union of the humanity and divinity in Christ without change (*wulaṭe*, ውላጤ), confusion or mixture (*tusaḥe*, ተሳሕ), separation (*fəllāt*, ፍልልት) and division (*buade*, ቡድን)'; see Mebratu Kiros Gebru 2010, 3–4.

which other participants, including the Christian kingdom's involvement is concealed.⁷

There is great deal of textual evidence that testifies to the deep involvement of the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia in slavery between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Christian textual production accelerated around the fifteenth century and produced a variety of literary genres including the chronicles of rulers, hagiographies, law codes and more. In the chronicles of various kings composed between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries we find numerous references to slavery in the Christian kingdom. In Christian Ethiopia, war was the primary means by which individuals were enslaved. One of the earliest historical works which testifies to this practice is the chronicle of *Aṣe 'Amdä Ṣəyon I* (r.1314–1344). Drafted in the fifteenth century, the work details the victories in war of the fourteenth-century king over various Muslims states to the south of the Christian kingdom.⁸ Within these accounts are some details indicating that a characteristic of *Aṣe 'Amdä Ṣəyon I*'s victories was to carry off captives of war into slavery. This practice was not limited to captured combatants. Contrarily, the text indicates the survivors of the vanquished along with 'their old ones and young ones, men, women, and children', were captured and brought to the capital.⁹ The text does not in direct terms indicate that these captives were then sold as slaves, but it can be inferred when considering this was normal practice in the region in this period.

The chronicle of *Aṣe Gälawdewos* (throne name *Asnaf Säḡäd*, r.1522–1559) is another valuable source which provides detail on the institution of slavery in Ethiopia in the sixteenth century. Like *Aṣe 'Amdä Ṣəyon I*, *Aṣe Gälawdewos* engaged in warfare with surrounding non-Christian polities and would routinely enslave survivors of his conquests. For example, Chapter 27 in his chronicle mentions that 'he never ceased to fight Hadiyya and the Oromo' and 'he took their sons and daughters into captivity [and] he made them drawers of water and cutters of wood'.¹⁰ Further, Chapters 33 and 34 speak of a campaign of *Aṣe Gälawdewos* against 'the country of wicked people', where upon his return he shared the spoils of his conquest among members of the royal family as well as the common people. Among the spoils of war listed is livestock, gold, silver,

7 Bonacci and Meckelburg 2017, 9.

8 There is ongoing debate as to when this work was composed and to whether it is eyewitness testimony to the wars, a later elaboration, or possible work of epic fiction composed in the fifteenth century. For more on the later argument, see Hirsch 2020.

9 Huntingford 1965, 59.

10 Solomon Gebreyes Beyene 2016, 198–199; Hadiyya was a kingdom located in the south-east of modern Ethiopia. The Ethiopian kingdom frequently was at war with Hadiyya as early as the fourteenth century and is frequently mentioned in kings' chronicles. Given the practice of enslavement via warfare, Hadiyya may have served as source for slaves in the Christian kingdom.

and people. The fate of these captives is clear when it states that *Aše Gälawdewos* gave to the people ‘male and female slaves from among the sons and daughters of the heathen people to make them water drawers and wood cutters’.¹¹ Finally, in Chapter 53 of the chronicle it is mentioned that *Aše Gälawdewos* again went to war against the Oromo, ‘and those who survived he set them under his power like slaves’.¹²

Aše Gälawdewos’s chronicle reveals some key insights into the institution of slavery in the Christian kingdom in the sixteenth century. Numerous mentions of reducing captives of warfare, including non-combatants, to slavery are made throughout the text. The chronicle also indicates that non-Christian peoples and polities, such as the Oromo and Hadiyya made up the primary targets for enslavement. Finally, it appears that beyond the royal households, the common people may have also held slaves, as indicated by the passage in Chapter 34 where *Aše Gälawdewos* gifts his subjects with captives of his conquest, to be enslaved.¹³

In addition to the frequent mentions of slavery via warfare, there are also textual references to internal slave markets in which Christians purchased and sold slaves. One example appears in a sixteenth-century copy of *Tä’ammärä Maryam* (*Miracles of Mary*). The manuscript (EMML 2275) was copied during the reign of *Aše Ləbnä Dəngəl* and belongs to the church of Darafo Maryam, in Ankobär, Šäwa.¹⁴ *Tä’ammärä Maryam* is a collection of various folktales detailing miracles performed by the Virgin Mary for those who call upon her name. This manuscript contains a story of a merchant who travelled to Damot to purchase a slave, and subsequently travels to the city Bärara in order to sell the slave and make a profit.¹⁵ Upon reaching Bärara, the slave escapes in the market and the merchant decides to call upon the Virgin Mary to return the slave. The Virgin Mary intercedes on his behalf and returns his slave, and as a sign of his grati-

11 Solomon Gebreyes Beyene 2016, 202–203.

12 Ibid., 213.

13 Ibid., 203.

14 Getatchew Haile and Macomber 1982, 345–355.

15 Getatchew Haile 1981, 174. Damot was an independent kingdom which existed from at least the tenth century CE. Damot occupied parts of modern-day Wälläga and western Šäwa and was increasingly targeted by Ethiopian kings with the rise of the Solomonic dynasty (1270). By the sixteenth century Damot was completely subjugated and a province of the Ethiopian empire; ‘Damot’, *E Ae*, II (2005), 78b–79b (LV. B. Berry). Bärara is a late-fifteenth- to sixteenth-century royal city which was *Aše Ləbnä Dəngəl* main residence. The location of Bärara has not been conclusively established although several scholars have made the claim it was located in or in close proximity to the modern-day capital of Ethiopia, Addis Abäba; see Habtamu Mengistie Tegegne 2020; ‘Bärara’, *E Ae*, I (2003), 473a–b (R. Pankhurst).

tude, the merchant donates the slave to be a servant in the church where he prayed to the Virgin Mary.¹⁶

The story of the merchant gives potential insight into slavery in fifteenth- to sixteenth-century Christian Ethiopia. The first being that profitable slave markets existed in the Christian kingdom, and were connected to larger long distance trade routes.¹⁷ Furthermore, Damot is portrayed in the story of the miracle as a primary market for obtaining slaves at a cheaper price.¹⁸ Lastly, that the Church was extensively involved in slavery as the text highlights; the slave was donated to the Church ‘to be a servant [...] cutting wood and fetching water for needs of the altar until the day of his death’.¹⁹ These are but a few examples of a plethora of references to slavery which can be found throughout various Ethiopian texts, from the fifteenth to sixteenth century. Further evidence of the Church’s extensive involvement can be found in the legal corpus of Ethiopia during this period.

Slavery in the *Law of the Kings (Fəṭḥa nāgāšt)* and other Legal Texts

While there is sufficient evidence to establish that slavery was indeed endemic in the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia between the fifteenth to sixteenth centuries, many questions remain regarding slavery in law. What exactly were the laws that governed the institution and how was slavery conceived in the legal theories of Christian Ethiopia? In examining this, we turn to the main legal text of the Ethiopian kingdom from, at least, the fifteenth century, the *Fəṭḥa nāgāšt* (*Law of the Kings*). The *Fəṭḥa nāgāšt* was originally a Copto-Arabic work compiled by a

16 Getachew Haile 1981, 174–175; Hagiographical texts as historical sources generally present several challenges. As noted by several scholars, these challenges include the fact that hagiography does not fit into a specific literary genre and there is no agreed method for interpreting these texts. See Wells 2020, 307. In the field of Ethiopian studies, hagiography is one of the most important literary genres for the reconstruction of Ethiopian history. However, as Selamawit Mecca has pointed out, Ethiopian hagiographical texts contain local obstacles including dating and authorship, as well as the material within the texts changing over time. Accordingly, as Selamawit notes, ‘Ethiopic hagiographic works must sometimes be viewed with extreme caution, recognizing the fact that they reveal more about the religious and cultural world of their authors than about the actual lives of their subject’, Selamawit Mecca 2009, 1366.

17 Ayda Bouanga states, that it is impossible to separate the slave trade from long-distance trade’, as they shared the same routes, markets and generally the same merchants. See Ayda Bouanga 2017, 45.

18 Francisco Álvarez makes numerous mentions of slavery including the price of slaves in various markets, including Damot, ethnic groups thought to be ‘good’ and ‘bad’ slaves and mentions several occasions where the Portuguese mission was gifted slaves by *Aṣe Ləbnä Dəngəl*; see Álvarez 1881, 99, 214, 348. For more on Damot as a primary market for slaves see Ayda Bouanga 2017.

19 Getachew Haile 1981, 174–175.

Coptic jurist, al-Ṣaḥī Abū al-Faḍā'il Māḡid Ibn al-ʿAssāl (1205–1265) in 1238 and enacted in the same year by the seventy-fifth Coptic patriarch, Cyril III Ibn Laqlaq (1235–1243) at the synod of Ḥārat Zuwayla in Cairo.²⁰ However, in the introduction to the *Gə'əz Fəṭḥa nāḡāšt* the legal text is given alternate origins. While Ibn al-ʿAssāl is still credited with authoring the code, he is incorrectly placed in the fourth century. Furthermore, the text is said to have been commissioned by the 318 bishops of the Council of Nicaea and Roman emperor, Constantine I (306–337).²¹ According to the colophon in the *Gə'əz Fəṭḥa nāḡāšt*, the text was retrieved from Coptic Egypt and translated from Arabic into Gə'əz by a Coptic deacon, Pēṭros Wāldā Abdā Sāyd in the fifteenth century on behalf of Emperor Zār'a Ya'əqob (1434–1468), who was interested in obtaining a Christian law code to deal with legal matters in his kingdom.²² In the Amharic translation of the *Fəṭḥa nāḡāšt*, Pēṭros Wāldā Abdā Sāyd is listed as translator and founder of the scholarly study of the *Fəṭḥa nāḡāšt*. It is claimed he started off teaching a scholar named Ḥāwaryan Krəstos who then taught other scholars who can be identified as scholars of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries.²³

The *Fəṭḥa nāḡāšt* contains two sections, the first is entitled *Mānfāsawi*, a Gə'əz phrase which is defined as 'spiritual' or 'of the spirit' and deals exclusively with ecclesiastical or canon law.²⁴ The later portion of the legal text is titled *Alāmawəyat*, which can be defined as 'of the world' and deals primarily with non-ecclesiastical law.²⁵ The *Alāmawəyat* portion of the text deals extensively with the institution of slavery, devoting an entire section to it, but it also appears under various topics including succession and marriage. However, rules dealing with slavery can be found throughout the entire text, in both ecclesiastical and civil portions of the code. In the *Alāmawəyat* portion of the legal text, in Chapter 31 titled, 'Liberty, Slavery and the Manumitted', the institution is substantially regulated. The chapter begins by asserting who could be enslaved and then provides justifications for enslavement.

20 Sidarus 2013, 197; Gawdat Gabra 2009, 25; Graf 1932, 37; Sand 2020.

21 Paulos Tzadua 1968.

22 According to 'Abd al-Samī' Muḥammad Aḥmad's 1965 Arabic translation of the *Gə'əz Fəṭḥa nāḡāšt*, errors in the Gə'əz translation can be attributed to the translator's inability to read Arabic correctly, and thus could not have been translated by Buṭrus Ibn 'Abd al-Sayyid (Pēṭros Wāldā Abdā Sāyd) a native Arabic speaker. Aḥmad claims that Buṭrus Ibn 'Abd al-Sayyid likely copied the text. Following Aḥmad's argument, this can be taken as an indication that a Gə'əz copy would have already been in existence and had been translated by an Ethiopian scholar, or a non-native speaker of Arabic. Samir 1991; *Fəṭḥa nāḡāšt*, London, British Library, EAP 432/1/132 (fifteenth century), fol. 139^{ra}.

23 *Fəṭḥa nāḡāšt nəbabənnā tərəḡ'amew* 1965–1966, 11.

24 Leslau 2006, 389.

25 Ibid., 61.

[The state of liberty] is in accord with the law of reason, for all men share liberty on the basis of natural law. But war and the strength of horses bring some to the service of others, because the law of war and of victory makes the vanquished slaves of the victors. Mosaic Law shows that unbelievers and their children must be held as slaves since it is written there: ‘Those whom you take from the people who dwell around you, and the aliens who dwell among you, let them, men and women, be your slaves. You shall buy [slaves] from among them and from among their offspring born in your land, and they shall be for you and your children after you, as an inheritance.’²⁶

As the passage indicates, captivity is the primary means by which an individual can be enslaved. This aligns with normal practice as previously illustrated by the chronicle of *Aṣe* ‘Amdä Ṣəyon I and *Aṣe* Gälawdewos. The passage further draws from the *Orit* (Octateuch) in the Book of Leviticus 25:44–46, which outlines the basics of the institution of slavery, namely the who, where, and how.²⁷ The criterion for who could be enslaved is established on religious membership, in this case only non-Christians were subject to enslavement. This is further emphasized in the passage when it forbids the sale of Christians to non-Christians or unbelievers.²⁸ Regarding from whence slaves could be obtained, the passage stipulates those peoples living around and among them could be enslaved, if they were from communities of ‘unbelievers’.²⁹ In practice, this was at times ignored and Christians were targeted for enslavement to such a critical point that *Aṣe* Gälawdewos issued an edict, using the *Fəṭṭa nəgāšt* as precedence, forbidding the sale or enslavement of Christians and making it punishable by death.³⁰ Moreover, the passage aligns with the story of the

26 Paulos Tzadua 1968, 175.

27 The Ethiopian Octateuch is comprised of the first five books of the Old Testament and the books of Joshua, Judges, and Ruth. The term *orit* is an Aramaic loanword which is also defined as ‘the Law’, ‘Law of Moses’.

28 Paulos Tzadua 1968, 175.

29 The Gə‘əz term frequently used for ‘unbelievers’ is *aḥzab*, the pluralized form of *hezḅ* which is defined as people or nation.

30 See Habtamu Mengistie Tegegne 2016. Gälawdewos’s edict is primarily concerned with ‘Arab’ slave traders and the enslavement of freeborn Christians. However, according to a letter from King João III of Portugal to Gälawdewos, dated 13 March 1546, the Portuguese may have been involved to some extent in the slave trade. The letter indicates that Gälawdewos had accused some Portuguese of enslaving ‘[his] subjects’ and selling them to Muslims. Given that Gälawdewos was only concerned with the enslavement of Christians, and continued to enslave non-Christians himself, it is safe to say the ‘subjects’ he is concerned with in this context are Christians. João III goes on to state in the letter that he has taken steps to put a stop to Portuguese involvement in selling Gälawdewos’s ‘subjects’ to Muslims; Whiteway 1902, 110–114.

merchant in *Tä'ammärä Maryam*, stating that slaves can be purchased and sold in markets provided they are not Christian.

The quote from the *Orit* is important in establishing the legality of enslaving unbelievers from within the kingdom and those in surrounding polities. It has been noted that the Old Testament laws have had considerable impact on the Church and its teachings, to the extent that it has been a point of contention with much of Christendom including the Coptic Church of Alexandria throughout its existence.³¹ It has continued to be a point of scholarly interest in the historiography of the Church over the last century. This has resulted in a considerable body of literature exploring the 'Mosaic tradition' of the Church and proclaiming it as a foundational aspect of EOTC theology and law.³² Indeed within the Ethiopian Church tradition, the Church views itself as inheritor of the Law of Moses through the Queen of Sheba and Solomon. Given the importance of *Orit* in the interpretation of law in the EOTC, the quote from Leviticus in the *Fəṭha nāgäšt* gives legal legitimacy to the institution of slavery, and the method of enslavement which had been practiced in the region well before the *Fəṭha nāgäšt* was incorporated into the Ethiopian Christian legal corpus.

With slavery legitimized via the *Orit*, the passage further reveals the status of slaves as property which could be passed on as inheritance to the children of slave masters. This point is driven home under a section which discusses the market price for purchasing and selling slaves. The text states, 'The price of a slave is like that of an object at any given time. It may increase or decrease. It increases in proportion to his hand's ability and decreases in proportion to his ignorance and advancement in age.'³³ The Gə'əz ንዋይ (nəway) which can be defined as 'property', 'object', or 'thing' in referencing the price of a slave.³⁴ The *Fəṭha nāgäšt* further draws out the notion of the enslaved as property in Chapter 42 on 'Succession'. Within these articles, slaves are bluntly referred to as 'a thing' and 'an object belonging to [their] master'.³⁵

31 There are multiple references to a 'Jewish spirit' of the EOTC, from the fifteenth century on. This is primarily centered on the Church historically following a portion of Mosaic Law, including circumcision, dietary restrictions, and Sabbath observance. The EOTC was often condemned by missionaries for 'corrupting Christianity' with 'Jewish superstition'. See Pawlikowski 1971.

32 Miller 2017.

33 Paulos Tzadua 1968, 177. Francisco Álvarez mentions in his sixteenth-century travel narrative that salt was used as currency in Ethiopia and the surrounding regions. According to Álvarez, the cost of a slave could be as high as 3 or 4 bars of salt in the kingdom of Damot and as low as 1 bar of salt in 'the countries of the slaves', see Álvarez 1881, 99.

34 *Fəṭha nāgäšt*, London, British Library, EAP 432/1/132 (fifteenth century), picture no. 88, fol. 84^{vc}; Leslau 2006, 410.

35 Paulos Tzadua 1968, 245.

As defined as property slaves are barred from inheritance unless manumitted by their master.

However, it must be noted that the *Fəṭḥa nāgāšt* also includes various scenarios by which slaves must be manumitted, including seven specific cases in which a slave must be freed³⁶ which are,

(1) He must be set free if he was owned as a slave by one of the master's parents and one of his grandparents, or by one of the master's children and his grandson, or by the master's brother and one of the latter's heirs. And if a man is part owner of a slave, so that there is another who shares ownership, if one of them is a rich man, he must buy him entirely and set him entirely free. (2) If the master or his wife becomes the slave's godfather or godmother, or if the master's daughter, with her parent's knowledge, [becomes his godmother], or if the slave becomes a priest with his master's permission, or if he becomes a monk, he shall be set free. (3) If his master makes him a soldier, he must set him free. (4) If the slave saves his master from being killed by fighting for him or warning him against danger, the master must set him free in compensation. (5) If a woman who is pregnant is set free, her child is also free. (6) If a slave has been put in jail by the enemy and afterwards returns to his master of his own will, he deserves to be set free. (7) If a slave's master dies, leaving no heir except the slave's mistress³⁷ or the State, the slave shall be set free.³⁸

In addition to these seven cases, the *Fəṭḥa nāgāšt* also provides moral basis for manumission as it declares it as 'one of the deeds of perfection which must be done [...] [and] an excellent form of alms [...] according to the original law of his natural liberty'.³⁹ Furthermore, the *Fəṭḥa nāgāšt* also asserts that masters should not manumit their slaves and send them away without any material

36 The Amharic commentary on the *Fəṭḥa nāgāšt* clarifies that of the seven cases of mandatory manumission, the occurrence of only one case is required. Accordingly, a slave owner could not impose more than one of these requirements for manumission.

37 Paulos Tzadua notes that the term 'mistress' in this passage is referenced as the Church in the Amharic commentary. The Amharic commentary interprets the term as ቤተ ክርስቲያን (*betä krəstiyan*, church) and further expounds on the Gə'əz passage by indicating that if the master is a priest, the slave then should be manumitted and be integrated into the Church as a cleric. Likewise, if the master is member of the lay class or non-clerical, then the slave must be manumitted and integrated into the government. See *Fəṭḥa nāgāšt nəbabənnā tərəg'amew* 1965–1966.

38 Paulos Tzadua 1968, 177.

39 Ibid., 175. This passage on manumission is referencing the opening statement on slavery in the *Fəṭḥa nāgāšt* which declares the state of liberty as the basis for natural law; see *Fəṭḥa nāgāšt nəbabənnā tərəg'amew* 1965–1966, 175.

wealth. Historical sources do indicate that slaves were sometimes freed for charitable reasons. Habtamu Mengistie Tegegne has documented late-nineteenth- to early-twentieth-century manumission documents, which detail accounts of slaves manumitted, adopted, and bequeathed to the estates of their master.⁴⁰ The nephew of *Aṣe Ləbnā Dəngəl*, *La'əkā Maryam*, himself a victim of enslavement by *Aḥmad ibn Ibrāhīm al-Ġāzī*, allegedly devoted his life to freeing slaves and is remembered in the Synaxarion on the day of 21 Ḥamle.⁴¹

While the *Fəṭḥa nəgāst* does not lay out specific rules for how masters should treat their slaves or vice versa, other texts fill the void on this topic. For example, the *Didəsqəlyā* ('Teachings [of the Apostles]') is a pseudo-apostolic text containing canon law which lays out rules of behaviour for masters towards their slaves and slaves to their masters. The *Didəsqəlyā* was originally composed in northern Syria in the third century and was likely translated from Arabic into Gə'əz no later than the fourteenth century.⁴² The *Didəsqəlyā* is an important source of canon law for the EOTC, and was particularly important to fourteenth- to seventeenth-century debates over the celebration or honouring of the Sabbath in the Church.⁴³ Concerning slavery, the *Didəsqəlyā* encourages servants/slaves to 'be prudent and serve their masters in the fear of God', regardless of the master's religious identity.⁴⁴ However, if the master is Christian, the *Didəsqəlyā* indicates that a slave must treat his master with more reverence and to view him 'like a father'.⁴⁵

The *Didəsqəlyā* additionally lays out a code of behaviour for masters towards their slaves. Masters are to treat their slaves with love, especially if he is a 'believer' (Christian). In addition, like slaves, masters are to view their slaves as their 'children' and their siblings in faith, provided the slave is 'doing the will of [their] master'.⁴⁶ In sharp contrast, the mistreatment of slaves by their master is viewed as sinful in the text. In Chapter 21 of the text where it discusses bishops and receiving offerings from those who are 'worthy', it states that masters who 'lay a grievous burden of service on their servants and torment them with hunger and thirst', are evil doers who are rejected by God.⁴⁷

40 See Habtamu Mengistie Tegegne 2011.

41 Solomon Gebreyes 2016, 199–200, n. 100

42 'Didəsqəlyā', *EAE*, II (2005), 154a–155b (A. Bausi).

43 Getatchew Haile 1988, 233–234

44 While the *Didəsqəlyā* states that slaves obey their masters regardless of religious affiliation, the text also includes prohibition of converting to or 'sharing in religion' of a non-Christian master. Harden 1920, 106.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid., 101–102. The passage further points out that offerings of 'such men' is to be rejected by bishops as it is an 'unclean sacrifice'.

How did all of these legal references on slavery play out in fifteenth- to sixteenth-century Christian Ethiopia? The Church was heavily involved with the administration of the kingdom and vice versa to the extent that mainly highly trained ecclesiastics occupied many of the important administrative positions in the kingdom.⁴⁸ Further, the main legal corpus, from which much of the kingdom was administered was produced by the Church. In the case of the *Fəṭḥa nāgāšt* the legal text functioned as the primary legal reference for matters in the Church and in the kingdom from at least the fifteenth century.⁴⁹ In addition, the references to slavery found in the fifteenth- to sixteenth-century chronicles as well as *Tä'ammärä Maryam* align directly with the legal framework on slavery laid out in the *Fəṭḥa nāgāšt*. Specifically, the enslavement of non-Christians via conquest is the foundation for the institution, from the initial act of enslavement to the purchase and sell of the enslaved. Additionally, the *Didasqəlyä* indicates that slaves were not to be mistreated or overworked and were to be treated as family if they were Christian. There remains more to be examined in the field of slavery in the Christian kingdom. Understanding the ways legal theory and the various textual references shaped slavery helps establish a foundation with which to build upon in future studies. Next, we will review slavery in the texts and legal theory of Islam in Muslim Ethiopia, fifteenth to sixteenth century.

Slavery in Islamic Law and the *Futūḥ al-Ḥabaša*

Islam, like Christianity has long been a part of the cultural and political landscape in the Horn of Africa, from the western coast of the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden and through the eastern highlands of modern Ethiopia. This association developed from the emergence of Islam in the Ḥiǧāz.⁵⁰ According to Muslim traditions, the first followers of the Prophet Muḥammad (d. 632 CE), under persecution in Arabia, sought refuge in Aksum (modern-day Eritrea and northern Ethiopia). The small group of refugees, composed of 14 or 15 Muslim men and women, were granted asylum by the Aksumite *neguś*, known in Islamic sources as the *naǧāšī*, around and after 615 CE. It is widely believed that the Aksumite

48 For example, one of the most important positions within the kingdom was the *'aqqabe sā'at* ('guardian of the hours') who was traditionally a representative of the EOTC and generally the abbot of a prestigious kingdom monastery. See Deresse Ayenachew 2020. Ephraim Isaac notes that 'Church' and 'State' in Ethiopia, historically functioned as an 'inseparable entity'. Clergy and educated lay people who attended the traditional church school system at different levels were able to manipulate their positions to wield significant political power in the Christian kingdom. It is further noted that the EOTC school systems specialized in developing both religious and 'secular' skills. Ephraim Issac 2013, 109, 133–142.

49 For more on Ethiopian law see Aberra Jembere 2000.

50 The Ḥiǧāz is a region in the western part of modern-day Saudi Arabia and includes the two holiest cities in Islam, Mecca and Medina.

negus Armaḥ (r. c.614–630 CE) is the Aksumite *naǧāšī* in Islamic sources who granted Muslims asylum in his kingdom. The historical event is remembered in Islam as the first *hiǧra* (migration), to distinguish it from the *hiǧra* from Mecca to Medina (then called Yatrib) that happened in 622. As a result, the Prophet Muḥammad allegedly declared that Ethiopians should be left in peace if they did not initiate any wars against Muslims.⁵¹ Accordingly, the Ethiopian Christian kingdom would be exempted from jihad and enslavement by Muslims.

After the first *hiǧra*, Islam continued to spread in the Horn of Africa, and, by the tenth century, Muslim communities had been established in the primary trade regions of both northern and southern Ethiopia and the coastal areas of Red Sea. Notable sultanates arose between the thirteenth and sixteenth century including the sultanates of Šāwa (c. ninth to thirteenth century), Ifat (c. thirteenth to sixteenth century) which occupied large portions of south-eastern Ethiopia all the way to the port of Zayla in modern Somalia.⁵² Given the proximity and control to popular trade routes, discussions on slavery in Ethiopia and the greater Horn of Africa/Red Sea region have often landed squarely at the feet of Muslims polities. In fact, the running theme in the literature is that Muslims and Arabs monopolized the slave trade in Ethiopia.⁵³ As noted in the previous section, this could not be further from the truth. However, while there was widespread involvement in the slave trade, Muslims were indeed heavily involved in the institution of slavery and dominated many of the slave markets in the Horn of Africa/Red Sea region.

In like manner to Christian Ethiopia, there are a wide array of external and internal sources that speak to the practice of slavery among Muslim communities and polities in Ethiopia and the broader Horn of Africa. According to some early Arab authors, the Muslim community in the Dahlak islands, off the Red Sea coast of modern Eritrea, regularly traded slaves and even paid tribute in slaves to Yemeni rulers in the tenth century.⁵⁴ The demand for Ethiopian or *ḥabašī* slaves in the Middle East and beyond drove the trafficking in the Horn of Africa in the ports of Massawa and Zayla and many Muslim rulers in the Horn of Africa routinely gifted rulers of Muslim lands large amounts of enslaved Ethiopians, including Christians, Jews and members of non-‘Abrahamic’ faiths in the region.⁵⁵

One of the better-known sources detailing slavery in Muslim Ethiopia is the *Futūḥ al-ḥabaša* (*Conquest of Abyssinia*), which details the sixteenth-century

51 Abū al-Walīd 1977, 11. Abū al-Walīd indicates in the passage on ‘The Enemy’ that the custom to exempt Ethiopia from jihad had been questioned as to its authenticity in the past.

52 Chekroun and Hirsch 2020.

53 Pankhurst 2011, 35.

54 Kelly 2020, 445; Chekroun and Hirsch 2020, 90–91.

55 Kelly 2020, 445–447.

jiḥād and conquest of Christian Ethiopia by *Imām* Aḥmad ibn Ibrāhīm al-Ġāzī (Grañ) (c.1506–1543). Composed by the Yemeni scholar and follower of al-Ġāzī, Šihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad ibn ‘Abd al-Qādir ibn Sālīm ibn ‘Uṭmān just after 1559, the *Futūḥ al-ḥabaša* provides some insight into the institution of slavery among Muslims in the region. One of the clearest aspects regarding slavery among Muslims in the region is how it was commonplace to take slaves as spoils of war and conduct slave raids among Christians and other non-Muslims in the area.

The *Futūḥ al-ḥabaša* details numerous accounts of al-Ġāzī enslaving peoples from the Christian kingdom during his jiḥād. One account details how the *imām* took a fifth of the spoils of war, including five hundred slaves, and divided them up among the people in the city of Harār.⁵⁶ As Christians, the Ethiopian individuals captured by al-Ġāzī were either enslaved and ‘sent to Arabia’ or brought back to ‘Muslim lands’ in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa and kept as slaves or ransomed back to the Ethiopian kingdom.⁵⁷ Some captives were also put to death and other groups were able to avoid capture or enslavement by either converting to Islam or agreeing to pay the *jizya* (tax) and be classified as *ahl al-ḍimma*.⁵⁸ Minor sultanates or Muslim communities are also noted for conducting small raids around the border areas of the Christian kingdom, which undoubtedly led to the victims of these raids being enslaved.⁵⁹

The *Futūḥ al-ḥabaša* in many ways aligns with the details of slavery found in the previously discussed Ethiopian Christian texts: (1) captivity through warfare is the primary means of enslavement; (2) non-Muslims were targeted for enslavement, in this case Christians who were not protected by the status of *ahl al-*

56 Šihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad 2003, 41. This account of dividing slaves up among the people is highly reminiscent of the later account in the chronicle of *Aṣe Gälawdewos*.

57 Ibid., 25, 35, 37, 144.

58 The accounts of individuals escaping slavery either through conversion or ransom seems to have been available strictly to the nobility their families. Several high-ranking nobilities in the Christian kingdom converted to save their family from slavery or were themselves captured and ransomed off. Some of *Aṣe Ləbnä Dəngəl*’s own family including his nephew La’əkā Maryam was enslaved by al-Ġāzī and ransomed back to the kingdom. Solomon Gebreyes 2016, 199–200, n. 100. The term *ahl al-ḍimma* in Arabic refers to ‘people benefiting from protection’ or ‘protected people’. The term historically is used in reference to *ahl al-kitāb* who are living under Muslim authorities and enjoy legal status and freedom to practice their religion provided they pay a special tax (*ḡizya*), respect the laws pertaining to them as a group and recognize the ‘exaltedness of Islam’. Friedmann 2012; Newby 2002b, 52b. The term *ahl al-kitāb* is defined as ‘possessors of the scripture’ or ‘people of the book’ and initially referenced Jews and Christians as repositories of earlier revealed books, the Torah, Psalms and Gospels respectively, but also Sabians and to a lesser extent Zoroastrians. The term was later extended to other groups as Islam spread into Asia. Newby 2002a, 21a.

59 Šihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad 2003, 57.

dimma; (3) local slave markets were connected to the larger trade routes leading out into the Red Sea and Indian Ocean.

The early-sixteenth-century travel narrative of Francisco Álvarez also confirms the widespread involvement of Muslim polities in slavery. In particular, it points out several Muslim polities which had grown ‘rich with great trade of slaves’ and additionally indicates that slaves from the kingdom of Damot were highly coveted by Muslims and polities throughout the greater Islamic world.

In a similar manner to the Christian kingdom, Muslim sultanates of the fifteenth to sixteenth centuries in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa practiced slavery and found legal support for the institution in Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*). The basic principle in Islamic law is that the natural state of all human beings is freedom, and slavery is a temporary accident.⁶⁰ The presumed freedom of all humans parallels the assertion in the *Fəṭḥa nāgāst* that ‘all men share liberty on the basis of natural law’.⁶¹ Furthermore, with the natural state of humans presumed to be free, the only way for slavery to come into existence is through captivity.⁶² As far as who could be enslaved, the agreement was firm that only non-Muslims could be enslaved through capture.⁶³ The references to slavery in the *Futūḥ al-ḥabaša* generally conform to these basic principles of slavery, namely the enslavement of non-Muslim captives of war. This stance against ‘unbelievers’ also aligns with the *Fəṭḥa nāgāst* which states that unbelievers and their children must be held as slaves.⁶⁴ In addition, slaves were considered the possession or property of their masters, in-line with how they are referenced in the Quran. In fact, the principal legal framework on slavery, for the most part aligns directly with the institution in Christian legal theory which is the enslavement of non-Muslims mainly via warfare or conquest.⁶⁵

Much of what is detailed in the *Futūḥ al-ḥabaša* and other sources aligns with the basics of slavery in Islamic legal theory. Muslims routinely captured and enslaved non-Muslims in raids and jihad and controlled many of the most

60 Brown 2019, 102; Franz 2018, 64; Hallaq 2009, 307.

61 Paulos Tzadua 1968 175.

62 Brown 2019, 101–102; Hallaq 2009, 175.

63 Brown 2019, 101–103. A fifteenth-century *fatwa* (opinion given by an expert of Islamic law) on the legality of selling and purchasing ‘Abyssinian’ slaves who ‘profess monotheism’, asserts that as long as it could be proved that a slave was converted to Islam via conquest and was previously classified as an ‘unbeliever’ their status as slaves was legal. The interpretation is grounded in the idea that, in this case, the enslavement is a state ‘caused by previous unbelief’ and accordingly is to serve as a deterrent against rejecting Islam’, Lewis 1990, 148.

64 Paulos Tzadua 1968, 175.

65 Even though the *ahl al-kitāb* retained special legal status in Islamic states, this did not always exempt them from slavery, as indicated in the legal writings of Abū al-Walīd 1977, 12–13.

notable historical slave markets in Ethiopia and the broader Horn of Africa. We can be certain that the laws were subject to interpretation and that customary law factored in as well, but the basic legal doctrine with which slavery is established is centred, like Christianity, on ‘unbelief’ as a justification of enslavement and a characteristic of the enslaved.

Conclusion

Historically, the institution of slavery was endemic to Ethiopia and individuals and polities from nearly all regions and faiths both participated in slavery and were enslaved themselves. Christianity and Islam have had a prolonged impact on social institutions in Ethiopia, slavery included. Islam and Christianity found legitimacy in the legal theories of their respective religions to capture, buy, and sell peoples from neighbouring communities in the region as slaves during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The legal theories of both faiths, state religious identity as the foundation of legitimacy for enslavement. This produced a dichotomy of ‘believer’ = ‘non-enslavable person’, ‘unbeliever’ = ‘enslavable person’ and allowed for further patterns to develop over time. In the two ‘Abrahamic’ faiths (Christianity and Islam), slaves would, on occasion, be converted to the religion of their master. However, social status of the enslaved often proved to be inescapable even when a slave gained freedom. These identities in turn became the foundation with which new identities emerged over time and to some extent, persist even in modern Ethiopian society. Therefore, understanding how religious affiliation functioned as a group marker in practices of enslavement across Ethiopian society establishes a foundation from which to examine the development of slavery and facilitates knowledge of how social categories were constructed as a justification for slavery over time.

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Joel A. Rogers and William M. Steen: Two Black Intellectuals and Slavery in Ethiopia

GIULIA BONACCI

Summary

As Ethiopianism has historically shaped the place of Ethiopia in the Black imagination as free of the woes determining the conditions of many Black people worldwide, how have Black intellectuals apprehended slavery in Ethiopia? Are they able to reconcile a certain imagination of Ethiopia with empirical data from Ethiopia? This article introduces and studies two texts by Jamaican American Joel A. Rogers and African American William M. Steen, in which they discuss the practice and significance of slavery in Ethiopia. Considered a 'mild' type of slavery by Rogers and a 'receding institution' by Steen, slavery is apprehended in its international dimension, when its abolition was a key issue in the Italian propaganda of the 1930s. Eventually, both authors converge in the confidence they place in the will of Ethiopia's rulers to eradicate slavery; they are keen supporters of the Ethiopian regime, a position reflecting the African American and Caribbean intellectuals' quite singular attachment to Ethiopia.

Introduction

A discussion on the sources for the study of slavery in Ethiopia was held in 2012 at the first research seminar on slavery and the slave trade held at Addis Ababa University.¹ The state of knowledge, the status of orality and the linguistic fragmentation of the sources were debated by colleagues when a Rastafari from the Caribbean, who had lived in Ethiopia for almost thirty years took the floor. He expressed his puzzlement at hearing about slaves, slavery and slave trade in Ethiopia. He underlined that Ethiopia represented a beacon of pride and sovereignty for the Black people scattered through the transatlantic slave trade and living in the Americas. He added that whatever the social dynamic called slavery that may have occurred in Ethiopia, it had nothing to do with chattel slavery and the inhumane conditions prevalent in New-World plantations for almost four hundred years. While this intervention unsettled the academic assembly little-familiar with diasporic entanglements, Black consciousness and claims to redemption, it unveiled an interesting paradox.

- 1 The research seminar 'On Forced Migrations & Labour: Slaves and Slavery from an Ethiopian Perspective' was convened by Giulia Bonacci (Institute of Research for Sustainable Development/French Centre for Ethiopian Studies) and Gideon Addisse (Addis Ababa University) between 2011 and 2014 at Addis Ababa University, with the involvement of numerous Ethiopian and foreign scholars over the years.

Ethiopia is present in the Black imagination based on various interpretations related to its biblical roots, its analogy with Blackness, and its myth of a racial citizenship prone to an elective and manifest destiny. This imagination is called Ethiopianism, and it has impregnated many religious congregations, political ideas and intellectual constructions since the seventeenth century, mainly in the Americas but also in many other places where colonial and racial violence intersected.² Most of the time, Ethiopianism fuelled a sense of pride, self-consciousness and reliance that in turn constructed an 'Ethiopia' free of the woes determining the conditions of many Black people worldwide. The Rastafari movement, for example, is a contemporary expression of Ethiopianism, and its faithful members contribute to a representation of Ethiopia that has the power to redeem enslaved black bodies. From that perspective, it is very difficult to apprehend the idea that slaves and slavery were constitutive of Ethiopian society.

In fact, throughout the centuries, Ethiopia did feed the slave trade towards the Middle-East and the Indian Ocean in chilling numbers while the many statuses of enslavement and bondage deeply marked inter-ethnic social and economic relations.³ Despite the silence in the Ethiopian public space regarding the historical experience of slavery in the region, multiple references to slavery can be found in both endogenous and exogenous sources, as well in the present-day experience of many Ethiopians.⁴ It is this discrepancy between concurrent representations of Ethiopia, one exempt from the violence of slavery and one infused by conditions and legacies of servitude that was exposed during the research seminar held at Addis Ababa University.

Beyond this specific example of an interaction between Ethiopian academics and a Rastafari, is it possible to interrogate how African American and Caribbean intellectuals have apprehended the topic of slavery in Ethiopia? In fact, numerous African American and Caribbean intellectuals have contributed to the production of knowledge on Ethiopia, even though many of them are not fully acknowledged in mainstream Ethiopian studies.⁵ They have worked in various disciplines, including history and anthropology, and on various themes, ranging from very local studies to transnational approaches.⁶ While it is out of the scope of this paper to propose a thorough study of this body of works and a sociology

2 Drake 1991; Scott 2004; Shepperson 1968; Chirenje 1987.

3 Pankhurst 1964; Austen 1988; Ewald 1988; Moore-Harell 1998; Boshia Bombe 2014; Kiya Gezahegne 2018; Meckelburg 2015, as well as the articles in this volume.

4 Bonacci and Meckelburg 2023.

5 Norris-Cervetto 2014.

6 This intellectual history sweeps across centuries, from the early contribution of Edward Wilmot Blyden in the mid-nineteenth century to the landmark writings by William Leo Hansberry, up to later publications on a variety of topics; some of them have become works of reference in various disciplinary fields, see for example Shack 1966; Scott 1993; Harris 1994.

of knowledge informed by the (black) margins of Ethiopian studies, some questions can be asked. Did African American and Caribbean intellectuals ever write about slavery in Ethiopia? To what extent has their own memory and knowledge of slavery in the Americas influenced their interpretation of slavery in Ethiopia? Is the discrepancy at work during our seminar on slavery in Ethiopia running through their scholarly production? Are they able to reconcile a certain imagination of Ethiopia with empirical data from Ethiopia? How is this data challenging their common Ethiopianism-inspired view of Ethiopia?

To address these questions, I have selected two sources, two texts produced by African American and Caribbean intellectuals in the 1930s and 1940s, a period marked by the prominent place of Ethiopia in international affairs: Joel A. Rogers and William M. Steen. I will first introduce these figures and their ties to Ethiopia, and I will then discuss their texts. Their acknowledgement of the existence of slavery in Ethiopia is evidence of a sound scholarship and their approach is discussed with particular attention given to the discrepancy, or *décalage*—to use the words of Brent Hayes Edwards—so typical of the relationship between Africa and its diasporas; here between Ethiopia on the one hand and African American and Caribbean peoples on the other.⁷

Two Black Intellectuals in Ethiopia and the War with Italy

Among the many African American and Caribbean people who have travelled or lived in Ethiopia, two of them stand apart for having addressed the topic of slavery in their intellectual production: Jamaican American Joel A. Rogers (1883–1966) and African American William M. Steen (1909–2008). Their contribution to knowledge about contemporary Ethiopia is filled with first-hand data and observations. They are different characters, of a different generation, and they came to Ethiopia in distinct conditions, but both were deeply moved by the war with Italy and what was then called the ‘Rape of Abyssinia’.⁸

Joel A. Rogers is a Jamaican self-taught author, journalist and intellectual, who migrated to the USA in 1906 and eventually became a naturalized American. While he was working as a Pullman porter,⁹ he self-published his first book, *From ‘Superman’ to Man* (1917), in which he criticized notions of African inferiority. He became one of the leading Black journalists of his generation and wrote many columns for famous African American newspapers such as the *Pittsburgh Courier*, the *New York Amsterdam News*, the *Chicago Defender*, *The Crisis*, or *The Negro World*. Above all, his coverage of events in Ethiopia made

7 Edwards 2001, 64–66.

8 Garvey 1935.

9 Pullman porters were hired to work for the railroad as porters on sleeping cars. They were exclusively Black people until the 1960s and formed the first all-Black union in 1925, contributing to the development of the Black middle class in the USA.

him a known and much appreciated figure in African American households. Sent by the *Pittsburgh Courier*, he covered the 1930 coronation of Ḥaylā Śəllase, describing in detail the unfolding of the ceremony, the presence of international guests and photographers. He described meticulously the richly embroidered vesture, the diamonds and the gold of the orb, the sceptre and the sword, and provided an impassioned description of this biblically-inspired event, astutely catering for an international audience in delivering its picturesque atmosphere.¹⁰ Through his reports from Ethiopia, including his 1936 *The Real Facts about Ethiopia*, which I discuss below, Rogers undoubtedly contributed in nourishing this Black imagination of Ethiopia dubbed Ethiopianism. Aside from his newspapers' columns, he published at least sixteen books and pamphlets covering African communities and concerns in many countries, as well as some other papers signed with a pen name.¹¹ The first Black war correspondent, he travelled to Ethiopia again during the war with Italy and sent reports pleading for African American solidarity with the Ethiopian people.¹²

It is important to underscore the significance of the war with Italy for African American and Caribbean people. The attack on Ethiopia in October 1935 and the swift Italian advance to Addis Abāba in early 1936 led to a major international protest in support of Ethiopia. While the League of Nations stood placidly by, without intervening in the defence of one of its members, popular reaction took shape from Harlem to Trinidad in the forms of demonstrations and riots, with Black communities volunteering to fight against fascism, and petitioning for the cause of Ethiopia. The racial dimension of the war proved a central element: a White fascist regime was assaulting a Black country, the only sovereign one on the African continent colonized by European powers. In fact, news about the war in Ethiopia circulated widely thanks to a number of newspapers and activists fuelling the first Pan-African global mobilization of the twentieth century.¹³

In the USA, numerous associations were founded to mobilize moral and financial support for the cause of Ethiopia. Among them, the Ethiopian Research Council (ERC) was founded by a group of Africans and African Americans under the presidency of William Leo Hansberry (1894–1965) and with the support of Mälaku Bäyyan (1900–1940). Hansberry was arguably one of the earliest African American historians of Africa, the teacher of the first university courses on the ancient history of Africa in the USA and a mentor to many African and African American students. Among other prizes, he was granted the first award

¹⁰ Rogers 1930.

¹¹ Asulkile 2006, 46–47.

¹² Putnam 2007, 425.

¹³ Harris 1994; Scott 1993; see as well for example *New Times and Ethiopia News*, the journal edited by anti-fascist Sylvia Pankhurst in London.

of the Ḥaylā Šəllase I Prize Trust in Ethiopia in 1964.¹⁴ Mälaku Bäyyan, one of the first Ethiopian students in the USA, registered at Howard University in 1929 where he met with Hansberry. The two men had in common Pan-Africanist perspectives and an engagement towards Ethiopia.¹⁵ Together they founded the ERC with the support of many dedicated intellectuals, including the Nobel laureate Ralph Bunche and the historian and social activist Willis Huggins.

William M. Steen took the position of secretary general of the ERC. He had first become interested in Ethiopia in 1928 when he followed Hansberry's course on African history. During the war with Italy, Steen engaged in writing newspaper articles and gave illustrated lectures with the objective of arousing interest in Ethiopia's plight.¹⁶ Steen also supervised the translation into English, the edition and the analysis of the 1931 Ethiopian constitution that was published by the ERC in 1936 in Washington. The ERC quickly developed contacts with other pro-Ethiopian associations in the USA, in Panama, Paris, and Addis Abäba.¹⁷ Its purpose was the diffusion of information on Ethiopia and the coordination of activities for the benefit of Ethiopia, while feeding the consciousness of a shared cause and identity.

Joel Rogers was a famed public figure while Steen was less known to wider society, but both their trajectories were shaped by their engagement in pro-Ethiopia advocacy, a project supporting their struggle against racial prejudice and segregation in the USA. While Rogers came to Ethiopia on several occasions, William Steen travelled to Ethiopia with a group of African Americans in 1943 and lived there for two years. He was part of a generation of Black professionals with a Pan-Africanist orientation that were recruited by the Ethiopian government to contribute to the reconstruction of the country after the war.¹⁸ The 1943 over-land journey to Addis Abäba Steen took with a group of African American professionals has been told in detail by Guyanese David A. Talbot—cousin of the renown Pan-Africanist T. R. Makonnen—who also travelled with the group and remained in Ethiopia until his death in 1988.¹⁹ Once in Ethiopia, Steen took the position of director of foreign information of the Ethiopian Press and Information Office, where he was given the task of promoting a wider understanding between post-war Ethiopia and the outside world. As editor, alongside David Talbot, he was in charge of the *Ethiopian Herald*, Ethiopia's first English-language newspaper founded in 1943 as well as the *Ethiopian Review*, a

14 See Harris 1981, 3–30.

15 Harris 1994, 20–28. Mälaku Bäyyan is the founder of the Ethiopian World Federation, chartered in 1937 in New York to centralize the support of African American communities to the cause of Ethiopia; see also Shadle 2021.

16 Steen 1947, Preface.

17 Harris 1994, 25.

18 Bonacci 2018, 301–303.

19 Talbot 1962, 7–34.

monthly magazine also in English. Steen wrote lengthy articles on the consequences of World War II for the *Ethiopian Herald*, he signed briefs as well as reports on Ethiopian political and religious affairs and made certain that papers focusing on Ethiopia's ancient history, written by Hansberry, were made accessible to the Ethiopian English-reading elite and to international readership in Ethiopia.²⁰

Both Rogers and Steen have addressed the issue of slavery in their written works, produced ten years apart, before and after the war, in 1936 and in 1947. A thorough reading of their work with a focus on their chapters related to slavery provide information about what was seen, known, and interpreted on issues of enslavement and dependency.

Joel A. Rogers and the 'Mildness of Slavery'

The Real Facts about Ethiopia is a thirty-four-page booklet written and published by Joel Rogers in 1936.²¹ It was reprinted multiple times, including in 1982 by the Black Classic Press, an African American book publishing company founded in 1978. A compilation of some of the columns he published in the *Pittsburgh Courier* while reporting from Ethiopia, the booklet comes with the import of first-hand data gathered from the field. It compiles general information about Ethiopia and highlights some of the main issues of concern for an African American readership: a discussion of the race of the Ethiopians, an outline of the depth of Ethiopia's history, portraits of Ethiopia's rulers, and a presentation of the complex political situation with Mussolini's Italy.

A brief section addressing slavery in Ethiopia begins by noting the widespread existence of various forms of slavery all over Africa, a contextualization made with the explicit purpose of de-exceptionalizing the Ethiopian situation.²² Echoing the Ethiopian view of the time and the 1924 letter of *Ras Tāfāri* to the League of Nations, Rogers posits that prisoners of war and victims of slave raiding constitute the main origins of all slaves in the country.²³ He underlines two forms of servitude: one outgoing, to Arabia, and one internal, qualified as 'do-

20 See for example Hansberry 1944; Steen 1945.

21 Rogers 1982.

22 This argument is a common Ethiopian response to the Western fixation on slavery in Ethiopia. See Sara Marzagora in this volume.

23 See letter of *Ras Tāfāri* to the League of Nations: 'The origin of slavery in Abyssinia dates to very ancient times. The first slaves were prisoners of war unable to pay their ransom and remained, therefore, in the service of the conquerors. [...] The Abyssinians, who were constantly at war, increased the number of their prisoners and, consequently, the number of their slaves. Accordingly, there gradually grew up a caste of slaves which became very numerous. Such slavery, moreover, was in conformity with the precepts of the Hebrew Law with which the Abyssinian were imbued and which formed the basis of their religion' (League of Nations 1924).

mestic servitude'. Rogers draws various parallels between slavery in Ethiopia and in the United States: he underlines how slavery in Ethiopia is not as harsh as peonage in the USA, a practice understood as a survival of slavery that leads American prisons to 'sell their prisoners to business concerns', an issue that remains under debate to this day.²⁴ Most importantly, contrary to the American situation, the stigma of servitude is not an intergenerational legacy: Rogers claims that, in Ethiopia, slaves can become members of a family, children of slaves with their master are freed and can rise to high social positions, and, once freed, no stigma remains. To this end, he gives the example of Emperor Mənilək whose mother had been a slave. This comparative approach contrasts the mildness of slavery in Ethiopia against the harshness of the USA's legacies of slavery. The purpose being to establish just how much more degrading slavery had been in American society compared to the milder version in Ethiopia. Rogers's opinion echoes the relativist view often expressed by Ethiopia's rulers and those of European visitors to Ethiopia.²⁵

As for abolition, Rogers finds ways to moderate the impatience of his readership: 'Beginning with Theodore [r. 1855–1868], succeeding Ethiopian emperors have tried to abolish slavery in vain. It was too ingrained'.²⁶ The journalist acknowledges that slavery is woven deep into the Ethiopian social fabric, and he underlines two related reasons for its delayed abolition: the 'African conditions' that would push individuals to seek a master 'in order to get food and protection'; and the laxity regarding smuggling by the surrounding European powers controlling access to the Red Sea. Ḥaylā Šəllase was praised for fighting against slavery (which he did to meet a condition for the entrance of Ethiopia into the League of Nations in 1923), and for his decree of a general emancipation that Rogers dates to 1935.²⁷ Rogers actually takes a strong pro-Ḥaylā Šəllase stance. He praises the outstanding accomplishment of the Ethiopian ruler in his fight against slavery, establishing laws, free education for the former slaves and their children, and founding an anti-slavery society and an anti-slavery court. However, Rogers does admit that the difference between serfs and slaves is blurred, and no real change may occur without the country's industrialization. A similar analysis is formulated by Trinidadian Pan-Africanist George Padmore, who

24 Gilmore 2000.

25 The narrative of the 'mild' character of slavery is conveyed by the nineteenth-century European visitors to the Ethiopian rulers, like William Cornwallis Harris or Emilius Albert De Cosson (see Meckelburg and Solomon Gebreyes 2017). It is also an important trope in the pro-Ethiopian writings in light of the Italian propaganda (Sandford 1946; Asfa Yilma 1935); and is reflected in some of the more analytical secondary literature (Teshale Tibebe 1995; Hussein Ahmed 2010).

26 Rogers 1982, 19.

27 However, there were numerous decrees that contributed to the abolition of slavery, in 1923, 1924, 1930, 1931, and 1942. See Takele Merid and Meckelburg 2024.

wrote a documented essay on Ethiopia for the *Negro Anthology* edited by Nancy Cunard in 1934.²⁸ He explains that the only way to eradicate ‘slavery and serfdom’ in Ethiopia is to change the ‘feudal economic structure’ of the country. While Padmore accounts for some of the reforms transforming Ethiopia’s state administration, he acknowledges that the ‘Slave Question’ remains heavily dependent on Ethiopia’s international relations.

Rogers gives the impression of navigating a thin line: he acknowledges the existence of slavery and the historical accumulation of slaves in Ethiopian society, and analyses the difficulty of its abolition: a conservative society, the absence of an alternative labour market, and what he describes as the ‘mildness’ of slave-master relationships. Rogers does not provide a class-based analysis of slave labour, rather, he valorizes the image of the warrior associated with the surge of victorious Ethiopia on the international stage—thus, ‘slaves are needed to till the soil’.²⁹ He tries to formulate excuses for Ethiopia’s current situation, that would ease an African American readership sensitive to issues of slavery and freedom. Eventually, the widespread practice of slavery does not tarnish Ethiopia’s glowing image in the Black imagination. Rogers often adopts a partisan approach in his writings, it is always a documented one, as the references closing this chapter testify: archives at the League of Nations in Geneva, recent first-hand accounts in French, or commentaries in English, and a couple additional references on the Red Sea and Arabia.³⁰ Nonetheless, his perspective falls short of understanding the entanglement of enslaved people in kinship lines that is prevalent in African societies compared to American ones. Furthermore, because he was a foreigner and therefore positioned on the margins of Ethiopian society, he was not able to see the intergenerational impact of slavery that has since been documented.³¹ Rogers was writing at a time when Italian war propaganda used slavery as a major argument to justify their ‘civilizing mission’ in Ethiopia. His acknowledging of the rampant practices of slavery in Ethiopia could be perceived by his readership as an argument aligned with the Italian propaganda.³²

William M. Steen and the ‘Receding Institution’

William Steen’s writing on slavery is of a different nature. In 1947, two years after his contract ended in Ethiopia, he presented his MA dissertation at the American University in Washington, an unpublished document of 302 pages.³³

28 Padmore 1934, 615–616.

29 Rogers 1982, 19.

30 e.g. the French journalist Joseph Kessel (e.g. Kessel 1933) or the then influential text by a member of the British Anti-Slavery Society, Lady Kathleen Simon (Simon 1929).

31 Boylston 2018; Salamon 1994.

32 Satta 2016.

33 Steen 1947.

Steen studies social change in Ethiopia through select institutional areas: government, Church, education, justice, and slavery; and he is particularly interested in the role of leadership in the country's social reconstruction after the war with Italy. In his eighth chapter, dedicated to slavery, he calls it a 'receding institution', and begins by underlining how slavery has fascinated foreign visitors and writers, all of whom having written about it. The goal of the chapter is two-fold: to establish the difference between the 'toleration' of domestic slavery and the practice of slave-trading for economic gain; and to show how the Ethiopian government is clearly engaged in solving the problem of slavery, and making 'great progress'. On the basis of documents drawn from the League of Nations in Geneva, limited British archival documentation and Ethiopian edicts and proclamations, Steen proceeds to present the nature of slavery in Ethiopia and the main steps and challenges towards its abolition. He tells of how he has spoken to 'hundreds' of enslaved people,³⁴ yet no interviews are quoted in his chapter, and the reader is given not a single precise life-history.

Almost paraphrasing the 1924-letter written by *Ras Täfäri* to the League of Nations,³⁵ Steen identifies firstly 'captives of war' who were made slaves, giving shape over time to 'a caste of slaves' in Ethiopian society, in line with 'Hebrew law'. Only later were those slave-owners solicited by Arab traders and became involved in a lucrative trade, raiding neighbouring countries to feed the growing demand in slaves. He enumerates and comments on the edicts of Emperor Tewodros and Emperor Yohannēs (r. 1872–1889) in their attempts to forbid the slave trade. As for the reign of Emperor Mənilək, Steen indicates that slavery was forbidden throughout the empire, but the enforcement was weakened due to the reluctance of governors in territories distant from the capital city. He continues by discussing the efforts of the Ethiopian government in abolishing the slave trade: the 1923 application to membership of the League of Nations, the 1924 edict, the 1931 amendment, and the 1932 establishment of a 'special department of slavery' following the visit of the Anti-Slavery and Aborigines Protection Society from the League of Nations.³⁶ Despite a lack of funds for resettling and educating former slaves, he underscores how offenders to anti-slavery laws were convicted, as evidence of the government's goodwill.

Far more frontally than Rogers, Steen introduces the contemporary and international dimension of slavery and its abolition.³⁷ Based on documentation produced by the League of Nations, Steen takes on arguments by some of the international experts on board with the Slavery Commission in Geneva. Firstly, he criticizes Maurice Delafosse's argument denying actual slavery in French colo-

34 Steen 1947, 233.

35 League of Nations 1924.

36 Miers 1997.

37 See for example Miers 2018.

nies, but instead serfdom, 'a high type of social organization, and that its immediate abolition would be ruinous to the natives as well as to the colonies involved'.³⁸ Steen discusses the suggestion by the Slavery Committee that 'serfdom or domestic or predial slavery' should have no legal status: he reminds his readers that the 'abolition of the legal status of slavery is entirely different from compulsory emancipation', and that slavery was just recently abolished in a few European colonies in Africa (he mentions the British Cameroons Mandate in 1925 and the British Sierra Leone Protectorate in 1928).

Secondly, Steen looks to the example of the Belgian Congo. In a 1936 inquiry, the Royal Belgian Colonial Institute distinguishes between captives of the slave trade and domestic slaves treated as 'members of the family'. Any immediate emancipation would imperil the food-supply of the population, be harmful to the slaves themselves and 'might have provoked the armed resistance of the owners'. To such a paternalistic reading of the situation in the Belgian Congo, Steen states that it should be known that the owners are 'white colonists from Belgium', and that the plantations in Congo are similar to those in the southern United States, and without such forced labour the colonists would not survive. For these reasons, he affirms that no such slavery has ever existed in Ethiopia. Even the Oromo (whom he calls Galla as was common then, but now is considered a derogatory term) submitted to *Mənilək* but were never enslaved. Thus, the distinction Steen makes is between plantation slavery and domestic slavery, maintaining that only the latter was widespread in Ethiopia.

Thirdly, in his analysis of the role played by Italy, Steen's argument is two-fold. On the one hand, Steen underscores how Italy brought a new type of servitude through the practice of forced labour and also one of colonial prostitution, the latter impacting the status of women and girls in the country.³⁹ On the other, he identifies one positive consequence of the Italian occupation: its role in loosening the Church's grip on the social structure of the country and how that unsettled the conservative class of nobles and dignitaries. Eventually, Steen acknowledges that despite all legal progress towards the abolition of slavery, including the 1942 proclamation, the economic situation is such that most people would prefer to stay in a dependency relation rather than being free but unable to sustain themselves.

Slavery and Ethiopia's Sovereignty

These two texts by Joel Rogers and William Steen demonstrate a serious engagement with Ethiopian society, even though they target a different readership. Rogers's short and highly reproducible pamphlet was meant to reach a wide

38 Steen 1947, 227.

39 On the Italians' role in the growth of prostitution in Ethiopia, see Pankhurst 1974.

public interested in Ethiopian affairs and concerned with racial issues, an everyday struggle in the context of segregation in the United States in the 1930s. Steen's unpublished dissertation was intended as a contribution to the growing body of knowledge in African and Ethiopian studies in American universities. While Rogers visited Ethiopia on various occasions and always for significant events, such as the coronation of Ḥaylā Śəllase and coverage of the war, Steen lived in Addis Abāba for two years, and due to his position had unprecedented access to Ethiopia's administration and development challenges. Nonetheless, both show how difficult it is to approach and document the practice of slavery in Ethiopia.

Three main reasons can be identified in restraining or complicating any type of analysis of the state of slavery in Ethiopia in the 1930s and 1940s. Firstly, the notion of mythical Ethiopia in the Black imagination still carried weight; illustrated by the general leniency both authors expressed vis-à-vis Ethiopia and their virtually enamoured way of looking at the East African country. Secondly, the inevitable comparison with the violent history of plantation slavery in the Americas, the social stigma associated with blackness from that time, and the ongoing struggle of Black people for dignity and rights induces a biased perspective on the Ethiopian situation. Indeed, despite the complexity of Ethiopian society, it is spared the colonial iron hand prevalent in other African counties, and is free of the racial drama associated with chattel slavery so prevalent in the Americas. Thirdly, in the Ethiopian context, the fluidity of status between serfs, slaves and other subjugated positions, entangled in various cultures and languages, makes it difficult for any foreign observer to decipher the complexity of those power dynamics. In spite of these conditions and Rogers and Steen's own origins and context and the time they spent in Ethiopia, their analysis does not sound totally irrelevant.

Rogers and Steen, however, strongly converge in their appreciation of the Ethiopian situation and in the confidence they place in the will of Ethiopia's rulers, government, and institutions to eradicate slavery and gradually transform the country. They applaud the reformist efforts of Ḥaylā Śəllase and are clearly in support of all Ethiopian initiatives that very slowly and gradually advance toward the eradication of slavery.

Another newspaper article illustrates the support expressed by African American and Caribbean intellectuals to the Ethiopian regime. In 1948, a year after Steen's departure from Ethiopia, African American Homer Smith, by that time an Addis Abāba resident for two years, publishes a column in the *Ethiopian Herald* under the editorship of David Talbot.⁴⁰ It severely criticized Arthur Vey-

40 Homer Smith (1909–1972), a postal worker-turned journalist, arrived in Russia in 1932 with a film crew. He lived in Russia for fourteen years before escaping in 1946 with his Russian wife to Ethiopia. He eventually returned to the USA in 1963. See Matusevich 2008.

sey, a London-based American correspondent for the *Chicago Tribune*, for his paper entitled 'Slave Trade Up in Ethiopia Since the War'.⁴¹ Homer Smith castigates it as 'a gem of journalistic prostitution and irresponsibility',⁴² and proceeds to dismantle Veysey's arguments step by step. For example, Veysey starts his article with 'The little Arabian dhow wobbles up against the ageless stone quay of the Ethiopian village', evidence for Smith that the journalist 'is a faker who, besides, is geographically illiterate'.⁴³ Then Veysey asserts that 'British officers [...] have found slaves in the homes of [...] Ethiopian officials', to which Smith replies,

Veysey does not seem to realize that Ethiopia is an independent and sovereign state and a charter member of the United Nations. British officers would have as much legal rights to search the homes of Ethiopian officials as Ethiopian officials would have to search the homes of British officials in the Sudan, Kenya or Uganda.⁴⁴

Homer Smith's core argument is that Ethiopia is a sovereign country, in which law and order exist, and a determined political power is wiping out slavery. Defence of Ethiopia's sovereignty is the political line binding these various interventions on slavery in Ethiopia by African American and Caribbean intellectuals. In fact, in the historical context of post-World War II, the sovereignty of African countries was still a blurred concept for certain Western media, even though decolonization was at hand. The defence of Ethiopia, a political praxis so ingrained in a generation deeply marked by the war with Italy was still functional in the late 1940s. In the last page of his booklet, Rogers mentions that 'Haile Selassie and his people seem perfectly capable of working out their own salvation, and establishing the form of civilization best adapted to their country'.⁴⁵ In saying so, Joel Rogers makes himself a keen supporter of the Ethiopian regime and, like William Steen and Homer Smith, almost an Ethiopian nationalist, a position reflecting the African American and Caribbean intellectuals' quite singular attachment to Ethiopia.

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42 Ibid.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid.

45 Rogers 1982, 34.

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Ethiopia, the UN, and the Legacy of the Italian Occupation: Käbbädä Mika'el's Political and Historical Thought on Slavery

SARA MARZAGORA

Summary

Published eight years after the end of the Italian occupation, Käbbädä Mika'el's *Ethiopia and Western Civilisation* is a historical refutation of Fascist propaganda about the persistence of slavery in Ethiopia. It was written at a time when the United Nations (UN) was deciding on the future of the former Italian colonies of Eritrea and Italian Somaliland, with Ethiopia on one side and republican Italy on the other competing before the UN assembly for the control of the two territories. This chapter analyses the ways in which Käbbädä theorizes the relationship between slavery and modernity. *Ethiopia and Western Civilisation* interrogates precisely, as the title suggests, Ethiopia's march towards *śaləttane*, or 'civilization', internally reworking Western modernization theory to defend Ethiopia's agency in both world history and the present. Käbbädä's appraisal of the history of slavery within this framework is nevertheless deeply ambivalent. The Fascist invaders had depicted Ethiopia as a backward land where people suffered under the barbaric yoke of slavery. On the one hand, Käbbädä attacks Italian propaganda by listing the obstacles Ethiopian emperors had faced in trying to abolish slavery, emphasizing the legislative steps forward in this direction. But, on the other hand, the Italian insinuation that Ethiopia was internally disunited had clearly struck a chord among the members of the Ethiopian elites, concerned as they were about the precarity of national unity. Käbbädä was, at the time, one of the major exponents of those Christian, Amharic-speaking intellectuals which Emperor Ḥaylā Šəllase promoted as his crucial political allies. Thus, the chapter contributes to the history of slavery in Ethiopia from the perspective of the 'centre', tracing the links between political thought and state policies in the late 1940s.

Introduction

When Käbbädä Mika'el (1914–1998) published *Ethiopia and Western Civilisation* in 1941 EC (1948/1949), he was as an up-and-coming civil servant who was slowly rising in the ranks of Ethiopia's political apparatus. Initially educated in church school, he later studied at the Catholic Mission School in Addis Abäba and at the school of the Alliance Française. He was scheduled to study abroad in France, but the Italian occupation of Ethiopia (1936–1941) thwarted these plans. He remained in Ethiopia instead, and during the occupation was hired by the Italians to work as a radio broadcaster. This collaboration with Italian colonial authorities was followed by a political U-turn after the 1941 liberation, when Käbbädä became one of the main supporters and propagandists of Emperor Ḥaylā

Šəllase.¹ *Ethiopia and Western Civilisation* was written to counteract the Italian colonial propaganda on the persistence of slavery in Ethiopia, a colonial propaganda that, paradoxically, Kābbādā had himself been involved in promoting in his previous role at the radio.

Despite the ambiguities of his professional past, the political line of *Ethiopia and Western Civilisation* is firm and unequivocal. The book is a carefully crafted nationalistic piece, published as a single volume in three languages: Amharic, French and English. The Amharic section ኢትዮጵያና ምዕራባዊ ሥልጣኔ (*Ityōpyanna mā‘ərabawi śələṭṭane*) at the beginning of the volume is followed by a French translation (*L'Éthiopie et la Civilisation Occidentale*) in the middle of the volume and an English translation (*Ethiopia and Western Civilisation*) in the last part of the volume.² As evident from the title, the book takes a far-reaching perspective on the issue of slavery in Ethiopia, situating it within the history of *śələṭṭane* ('civilization') a key term (maybe *the* key term) in the political debates of Amharic-speaking intellectual elites in the first half of the twentieth century.

Śələṭṭane is conceptualized by Kābbādā in two ways. The first use of 'civilization' is descriptive: Kābbādā employs the term to signify the culture, society, and way of life of a particular geographical area in each historical period. Hence, he talks about 'the Greek civilization' or 'the Roman civilization', and, more obviously, his title refers to 'Western civilization'. The second use of 'civilization' is normative: Kābbādā uses it to signify specifically *modern* civilization as something that societies have or do not have, and towards which societies should in any case strive. In this acceptance, civilization can be 'achieved' or 'acquired' and is thus an attribute of existing countries or societies.

To go with its trilingual structure, the book has two main audiences. The first is educated Ethiopians, to whom Kābbādā presents a sweeping history of civilization, situating Ḥaylā Šəllase's reforms within a global context. Kābbādā's goal in this regard is to address the concerns about the role of Ethiopia in a rapidly globalizing world, showing how Ḥaylā Šəllase is excellently placed to ferry Ethiopia towards a beneficial integration into the world-system. The second audience is the international community, especially Western politicians and diplomats working for the United Nations, to whom Kābbādā pleads his case about the future of the former Italian colonies of Eritrea and Somaliland. Kābbādā's goal on this count is to counter pejorative views of Ethiopia as 'primitive' and 'barbaric', asserting instead the centrality of Ethiopia in world history and its commitment to the international values of progress and development.

1 For an English-language biography of Kābbādā, see Molvaer 1997. In Amharic, see the piece written by another famous intellectual and playwright from the period: Täsəfaye Gässäsä 1964.

2 The French and the English translations were authored by Marcel Hassid.

Ethiopia in an Unequal World: The League of Nations, the Italian Occupation, and Kābbādā's Appeal to the UN

Kābbādā's 'history of civilization' has clear universalist ambitions, but also responds to a very specific political context. Kābbādā writes as the United Nations were deliberating on the fate of the two former Italian colonies of Eritrea and Somaliland, at the time both under provisional British Military Administration. Different solutions were being debated at the UN for the future of Eritrea and Somaliland, including returning the administration to the Italians. The Italian government was lobbying hard for this latter outcome, showing a clear continuity in colonial policies between the deposed Fascist regime and the republican government that came to power after World War II.³ The Ethiopian government did not refrain from lobbying in turn for Eritrea and Somaliland to be annexed to Ethiopia. *Ethiopia and Western Civilisation* should be seen as part of this Ethiopian lobbying effort. The book aims at steering the UN proceedings towards Ethiopia's preferred solution, and, even more passionately, away from Italy's preferred solution.

Kābbādā's core argument is that Ethiopia needs access to the sea to be able to modernize. Kābbādā does not question that Ethiopia is 'behind' Western nations in terms of development, but he rejects explanations of this developmental lag based on essentialized notions of intrinsically superior and intrinsically inferior societies or races. Ethiopia has rather been delayed by circumstantial, accidental factors, the most important of which is geographic isolation. Landlocked and surrounded by hostile polities, Ethiopia had remained for centuries excluded from the discoveries made in Europe from the seventeenth century onwards.⁴ Kābbādā's appeal to the United Nations should be seen as part of his understanding of civilization as the product of transnational interchanges and connectivity: 'it is obvious that a nation cannot modernize by its own means, without the assistance of other nations'.⁵ And, so far, European nations have not offered Ethiopia much in the way of help. On the contrary, they have proactively sabotaged her efforts at development. They are the ones who occupied the coastal areas of the Horn of Africa, preventing Ethiopia from having a port, with the precise objective 'to hamper [Ethiopia's] progress'.⁶

Ever since he came to power in 1916, *Ras Tāfāri* (later to be crowned Emperor Ḥaylā Šəllase) was keenly aware that Ethiopia's independence remained under threat. The founding of the League of Nations after World War I seemed to potentially offer both legal protection and international recognition.⁷ Tāfāri ap-

3 Srivastava 2018.

4 Kābbādā Mika'el 1948/1949, 83.

5 Ibid., 88.

6 Ibid.

7 On the Ethiopian rationale to join the League, see Coleman 2008; Iadarola 1975; Whyte 2014.

plied for membership on behalf of Ethiopia in September 1923. The application was filed in a tense political climate, in which the surrounding colonial powers of Britain, France and Italy were trying to offset one another's plans to reap economic and political benefits in independent Ethiopia. Moreover, a heated press campaign about the persistence of slavery in Ethiopia had gained momentum in the British press the year before, with some prominent anti-slavery societies joining in to amplify the outrage. The discussion on Ethiopian slavery reverberated all the way to the League of Nations, and in analysing Ethiopia's application, the League's Sixth Committee expressed concerns over Ethiopia's ability to meet the articles of the covenant that concerned abolition. The committee eventually decided to admit Ethiopia, but the membership was attached to three 'special obligations' that premised the continuation of Ethiopia's membership on the successful suppression of the slave trade and emancipation of enslaved people in Ethiopian territory. The third special obligation required Ethiopia to agree that the League would monitor Ethiopia's progress in fulfilling the first two obligations.⁸ The implications of the three special obligations emerged very starkly in the months before the 1935 Italian invasion, when the Fascists attempted to justify their military preparations against Ethiopia on the grounds that the special obligations had not been fulfilled and slavery was still rampant.

Käbbädä disagrees with this propaganda in the firmest possible way: Ethiopia had met all the special obligations and complied to all of the League's many requests. He repeatedly underlines the discipline with which Ethiopia strived to meet the expectations of the other nations. Under *Ras Täfäri* (Ḥaylā Šəllase), he tells his readers, Ethiopia made a sincere effort to fit into international society and abide by its rules. Ḥaylā Šəllase believed in the values of peace and sovereign equality that the League of Nations ostensibly aimed to protect, and was 'anxious to offer the contribution of his people to an organization that had such lofty ideals'.⁹ More pragmatically, Ethiopian elites also knew that Ethiopia's legitimacy depended on complying with the principles of international law: 'Emperor Ḥaylā Šəllase knows that Ethiopia must participate to all the activities of civilization undertaken by other nations'.¹⁰ The decrees issued by the Ethiopian government to abolish slavery should also be understood as part of the political and diplomatic efforts to achieve international recognition. They were politically and economically significant on a domestic level, but their significance also lay in increasing 'the esteem for Ethiopia among the people of the world'.¹¹

8 On how the three special obligations contradicted one another, and how they were informed by the 'standard of civilization', see Parfitt 2019, 289–93. See also Partiff's criticism of Allain 2006.

9 Käbbädä Mika'el 1948/1949, 76

10 Ibid., 58.

11 Ibid., 64.

But what good did this obedience do? The international system does not reward compliance, but only power. Italy violated the League of Nation's covenant and attacked a former member country, and yet the League 'granted an unrighteous impunity to the Fascist aggressor'.¹² Between the powerful invader and the weaker victim, the League did not side with the party that abode by its covenant, but with the most powerful. The League's inability to prevent wars of aggression ultimately 'voided' the hopes of the people that had founded it.¹³ Käbbädä sees very lucidly that the League's inability to stop Mussolini was not merely a 'failure' of international law, but rather the logical conclusion of the inequality on which the international system had been built since the beginning.

Ethiopia in an Unequal World: Käbbädä's Rebuttal of Italian Propaganda

The description of the unfairness of the international system is Käbbädä's starting point to counteract the Western, especially Fascist, propaganda about the persistence of slavery in Ethiopia. Käbbädä references this propaganda explicitly: 'when Italy occupied Ethiopia, her newspapers shouted everywhere that, thanks to her, slavery had totally disappeared in Ethiopia'.¹⁴ The Fascists extensively used anti-slavery discourse to justify their invasion of Ethiopia. They knew that a war of unilateral aggression was not likely to be seen favourably by public opinion and calculated that they could leverage the prevalent anti-slavery consensus of the time to cast the invasion as a humanitarian intervention.¹⁵ They also had to find a legal argument to defend their actions at the League of Nations, whose charter bound member states not to engage in military offensives against other members. Here, the Italians hoped that claiming that Ethiopia had not fulfilled its obligations when it came to the eradication of slavery could void Ethiopia's membership and stir the League towards voting for an expulsion.

The relentless smear campaign against Ethiopia that started at the beginning of 1935 was designed and coordinated from the top by the Italian Ministry of Press and Propaganda, who instructed Italian media to paint Ethiopia as a 'barbaric and backward country full of beggars and bandits'.¹⁶ The Italian press eagerly translated foreign anti-Ethiopia publications, especially from Britain, where anti-slavery societies and campaign groups had continued to put out damning reports about the persistence of slavery in the country.¹⁷ Just in the year 1935, hundreds of publications (most of which, predictably, of low scholarly standards) came out in Italy painting Ethiopia as 'the last bulwark of slavery' in

12 Ibid., 76.

13 Ibid., 77.

14 Ibid., 60.

15 Ribi Forclaz 2015.

16 Quoted in Satta 2016, 72.

17 Fieldhouse 1972; Ribi Forclaz 2015; Miers 1997.

the world.¹⁸ These publications stressed how the ‘Amharas’ making up the Ethiopian government were deliberately perpetuating the enslavement of other ‘races’ in the country. The accusation had a clear ethno-racial component: not only was the Ethiopian government tyrannical and violent towards its people, but this domination was also connotated as a form of inter-racial oppression. The Italians invested considerable financial resources in their propaganda efforts, both domestically, where these efforts were extremely successful, and abroad, where the results were more mixed.¹⁹

To refute the Italian propaganda, Kābbādā puts forward four main counterarguments. His first counterargument is that Western nations should not underestimate how difficult it is to abolish an old custom such as slavery, from which so many people financially benefit.²⁰ Western nations themselves took a very long time to adopt abolitionist policies, so the request that Ethiopia does the same in just few years’ time is evidence of the double standards of international law. Just like in other countries, anti-slavery legislation was met with resistance in Ethiopia, since slaves were a source of wealth and profit for many, and for a very long time ‘the Ethiopian people were not prepared, neither mentally nor economically, to make such sacrifice on behalf of civilization’.²¹ The abolition of slavery in Ethiopia passed through the same stages as in the West, and in the process Ethiopia ‘faced the same difficulties, if not greater ones, as those encountered by other countries’.²² So why is Ethiopia singled out for criticism? ‘Men always [...] want to find in others virtues that they themselves do not have’.²³ Let those without sin cast the first stone: ‘the severity that foreigners have showed towards a country accused of still having slaves was due to the painful memories of slavery as it was known in their own history’.²⁴

Moreover, it is false to claim that in Ethiopia there was no political will to push for abolition. Ethiopian emperors did make significant legislative efforts in that direction over the decades, but the laws remained ineffective because the emperors lacked the means to implement the legislation. Kābbādā’s second counterargument is that Tewodros II, Yoḥannēs IV and Mēnilāk II all attempted to abolish slavery, but abolition was ‘impossible’ in their time.²⁵ The emperors

18 In the title of an eighty-pages pamphlet published under the name Giulio Cesare Baravelli 1935 (the real author was journalist Mario Missiroli) and promptly translated by the Fascists into five other languages for international circulation.

19 Satta 2016, 84.

20 Kābbādā Mika’el 1948/1949, 64.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid., 60.

23 Ibid., 70.

24 Ibid.

25 On slavery in nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century Ethiopia, see Fernyhough 1988; Moore-Harell 1999; Pankhurst 1964.

‘pledged themselves by promise and treaties but were unable to fulfil their obligations’,²⁶ because the people were ‘not yet ready to accept them’.²⁷ European diplomats and politicians pressured the Ethiopian leaders to pass abolitionist legislations, and Mənilək, who keenly understood the importance of international recognition for the stability of his reign, made various efforts to demonstrate his goodwill in this regard. He sent several letters to the king of Italy, for example, reporting that he had freed twenty thousand slaves during his military campaigns in the south. He also signed the 1889 Treaty of Wəčale whose Article 14 committed Ethiopia to fight against slavery, and the following year he signed the 1890 Brussels Conference Act.²⁸ These measures, however, were ‘nothing more than an [abstract] threat to the slave traders’ and Mənilək proved unable to enforce them.²⁹ Kəbbädä cites the emperor’s complaint, in a letter to the king of Italy, that ‘the nations beyond the Red Sea have no other occupation than to infiltrate my country and the country of the [Oromos] and to kidnap the children, in order to sell them in Arab countries or on the coast’.³⁰

According to Kəbbädä, this letter suggests that the central government in Ethiopia did not have enough power to implement laws across the territory of the empire. The state was still very decentralized in the nineteenth century, with provincial leaders wielding a high degree of political autonomy. For the central government, ‘it was always difficult [...] to control the actions of the chieftains or the government officials, their exactions, the abuses they committed when collecting taxes from the merchants, and the harassment through which they used to submit the peasants’.³¹ For the abolition of slavery to come into effect and for slaves to be freed across the Ethiopian territory, then, the executive reach of the central state had to expand first. From this point of view, the steps towards the abolition of slavery in Ethiopia should be contextualized within the political changes incurred by the Ethiopian state over time. Abolition could not be pursued outside of a systematic overhaul of the meaning and functions of the central state, and it is only under Ḥaylā Šəllase that the processes of political and administrative centralization finally gained sufficient momentum.³²

In Kəbbädä’s analysis, Ḥaylā Šəllase inherited a difficult position when it came to slavery.³³ The previous anti-slavery legislation had paradoxically made the slave trade more brutal. Slaves were moved by night in order not to be spot-

26 Kəbbädä Mika’el 1948/1949, 61.

27 Ibid., 67.

28 Ibid., 63.

29 Ibid., 67.

30 Ibid., 63.

31 Ibid., 76.

32 Ibid., 64.

33 Ibid., 68.

ted, and those too old to keep up the pace were 'slain'.³⁴ Plus, the traders pushed further and further into the border regions for slave raids, and these border raids were much harder for the government to control.³⁵ Faced with this bleak scenario, Ḥaylā Šəllase intervened head-on to address the causes of slavery.³⁶ Käbbädä explains that the problem of slavery in Ethiopia was intimately connected with the plight of the peasantry. Some peasants ended up as slaves or were forced to give their children up as slaves, whenever they were not able to pay the hefty tributes to which they were subject. Provincial leaders, often pursuing their own personal gains and disregarding existing laws, abused their powers and arbitrarily demanded higher tributes, forcing the peasants into slavery if they could not meet the payments.³⁷ Against these practices, Ḥaylā Šəllase introduced fiscal reforms that replaced the old tributes and services that peasants were asked to offer their local governors with a uniform tax system that centralized revenue in the hands of the national government. This, according to Käbbädä, ensured the discontinuation of 'all of the [arbitrary] [taxation] practices of the regional lords over the peasants, practices difficult for the government to control'.³⁸ Käbbädä presents these reforms as aimed to lessen the burden of the peasantry ('[their] only objective was the welfare of his people'),³⁹ but these centralizing measures had the other obvious political goal of eroding the autonomy of provincial leaders, eliminating their local source of wealth, and bringing them under the control of the government.⁴⁰

Besides addressing the politico-economic causes of slavery through the fiscal centralization of state revenues, Käbbädä argues, another crucial step undertaken by Ḥaylā Šəllase was the strengthening of the powers of the judiciary. *Ras Täfäri*/Ḥaylā Šəllase issued at least three major anti-slavery decrees before the 1935 Italian invasion⁴¹, but the cases of previous abolitionist legislation had made clear that new laws were ineffective per se if the government did not have the tools to enforce it. Ḥaylā Šəllase invested important resources in making sure the legislation was implemented.⁴² According to Käbbädä, particularly

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.

36 For more information on this period, see Abdussamad H. Ahmad 1999; McCann 1988.

37 Käbbädä Mika'el 1948/1949, 74.

38 Ibid., 75.

39 Ibid., 74.

40 Guluma Gemedä 2002, for example, makes this argument with reference to the kingdom of Ḡimma, which had a semi-autonomous status within the Ethiopian state, with its own king and an annual tribute to pay to the central state. Ḥaylā Šəllase ended the semi-autonomous status of the kingdom in 1932 under the pretext of eradicating slavery to gain control over the lucrative coffee trade of the region.

41 The text of this legislation is quoted in full by Käbbädä Mika'el 1948/1949, 65.

42 Ibid., 68.

effective were the new punitive measures Ḥaylā Šəllase introduced as a deterrent for the merchants still involved in the trade. The traders, if found guilty, could be condemned to punishments ranging from flogging to life imprisonment and even to death by hanging. Kābbädä lists some examples of these verdicts for the readers.⁴³ The emperor also ‘appointed judges in the capital and in all the provinces, whose duty it was to set slaves free and see that the freedom granted to them was recognised’, thus making sure there was a network of state appointees across the Ethiopian territory to monitor the local situations.⁴⁴ As a result of these reforms, Kābbädä resolutely concludes, slavery has completely disappeared in Ethiopia. ‘The eradication of slavery has been fulfilled’, he announces, and, in another passage, ‘the abolition of slavery has been done and done a long time ago’.⁴⁵ Kābbädä’s third counterargument is therefore that the Italians’ accusations are just patently untrue. If abolishing slavery was impossible for the emperors of the past, Ḥaylā Šəllase instead managed to end it once and for all.⁴⁶ Apologetic (when not outright sycophantic) as ever about the emperor’s track record, Kābbädä does not hesitate to label Ḥaylā Šəllase ‘the [Abraham] Lincoln of Ethiopia’.⁴⁷

Ethiopia in an Unequal World: Italian Propaganda as a Threat to Ethiopia’s Nation-Building

Despite the strength of his counterarguments, Kābbädä betrays a deep-seated ambivalence and hesitancy on the topic of the Italian propaganda. On the one hand, he knows that by engaging with the accusations he is implicitly lending them credibility in the eyes of his readers. But, on the other hand, he does find the accusations dangerous enough to warrant rebuffing. His explanation is not very persuasive:

The emancipation of slaves in Ethiopia is [...] an accomplished fact. If, therefore, we are devoting, in this work, greater attention to slavery, it is merely to give a historical overview of the problem and not because it is a problem of topical interest. That is why I should like the reader—and especially the foreign reader—to consider the following pages as a retrospect, a looking back to things past, and not a reference to a question that is still occupying our minds.⁴⁸

43 Ibid., 68–69.

44 Ibid., 64.

45 Ibid., 59.

46 Ibid., 71.

47 Ibid., 58.

48 Ibid., iii.

Käbbädä will thus defend Ḥaylā Šəllase's record, even if it does not need defending. This preamble betrays some insecurity and might be interpreted as a case of *excusatio non petita*, *accusatio manifesta*. Käbbädä's position oscillates between dismissing the Fascists' accusations all together, and engaging in a point by point rebuttal: 'such accusations are without foundation: we will loiter only to try to understand in which way these accusers wanted to take advantage of the situation created by these calumnies'.⁴⁹ Contrary to what he tells his readers, Käbbädä seems to consider the Fascist propaganda still insidious and dangerous eight years after liberation⁵⁰.

The Fascists had heavily relied on a 'divide and rule' policy in Ethiopia, exploiting the political grievances of those groups that resented Addis Abäba's government and Ḥaylā Šəllase's centralizing policies. Fascist propaganda had cast the *habäša* elites ('Amharas') as tyrannical oppressors of the country's religious and cultural minorities. Albeit with exceptions, it seems that this policy was at least in part successful, leaving the post-liberation political class with the dilemma of how to forge national unity out of the many social fractures intentionally widened by the colonisers.⁵¹ As we know, the solution adopted by Ḥaylā Šəllase after the 1941 liberation was a rigid assimilationist policy, and a further push towards cultural and political centralization.

The apprehension about Ethiopia's nation-building process nevertheless remained, and Käbbädä betrays a certain apprehension when talking about national unity. The Italian accusation that Ethiopia's *habäša* elites condoned or even favoured the enslavement of non-*habäša* groups was evidently still harmful and difficult to disprove. Käbbädä duly omits to account for the ethno-cultural and religious patterns that defined the practice of slavery in Ethiopian history. His resulting argument entirely glosses over the existing grievances of Ethiopia's peripheral groups instead of addressing them. While he has an arsenal of counterarguments to invalidate the Italian claims that Ḥaylā Šəllase did not do enough to curb slavery in the country, he does not even mention the other central claim of Italian propaganda on the existence of ethno-cultural power hierarchies in the country.

49 Ibid., 58.

50 As I have argued elsewhere (Marzagora 2019) this period of Käbbädä's oeuvre is characterized by a remarkable intellectual openness and epistemological pluralism. *Ethiopia and Western Civilisation* is unsystematic and occasionally incoherent, with chronological jumps backwards and forwards in time, sudden digressions, and logical inconsistencies. But instead of considering this a scholarly shortcoming, we can instead interpret it as an example of what Rose Parfitt calls, via Bakhtin, 'discursive hybridisation', an intentional juxtaposition of different epistemologies that foregrounds the power hierarchies between them (Parfitt 2019, 353, 430).

51 For more detail, see Braukämper 2011; McClellan 1978.

He instead insists on the need for unity regardless of differences or grievances. He warns his (in this case Ethiopian) readers through some historical examples: when the Persians invaded, Athens and Sparta joined forces despite their historic rivalry. What ruined Rome were internecine wars and rivalries between generals that had acquired too much power. Kābbādā's long digression on the role of the Amharic language in Ethiopia has to be interpreted in this same vein.⁵² Ever the humanist, Kābbādā considers the national language as a key tool of national unification: 'how will Ethiopia, where several languages are spoken, be able to complete her unity if she does not improve her own language first?'.⁵³ The development of Amharic as single national language is for Kābbādā the only way for 'Ethiopia, a vast Empire, an amalgama of people having various religions' to 'fulfil the great civilizing mission that destiny has assigned her'.⁵⁴

The argument comes full circle: for Ethiopia to be able to pave the way for an even more advanced *śāləttane*, it needs a unity internally predicated on (linguistic) assimilationism. The reasoning implies that socio-cultural fractures did exist—the same socio-cultural fractures that the Fascists manipulated to legitimize their colonial occupation. The implication, though, is that domestic political grievances were selfish, because they undermined the authority of Ḥaylā Šəllase in the eyes of the international community and therefore exposed the country to the risk of another colonial invasion. These fixtures had already been exploited by Italy and the other big nations to attempt to 'dismember' Ethiopia.⁵⁵ Hence, only a national unity predicated on sameness, in which differences are gradually eliminated, could guarantee the preservation of national independence in the future. In my reading of *Ethiopia and Western Civilisation*, this remains Kābbādā's main concern throughout the book—that in a globalized world in which Ethiopia already occupied a subordinate position, internal diversity had already been a liability and would always remain a source of vulnerability.

Ethiopia in World History: Ancient Greece vs Ancient Rome

Kābbādā sees very clearly that the Fascist arguments and Ethiopian counterarguments on slavery are intertwined with broader ideologies of progress and development, and therefore situates his plea to the UN within a far-reaching history of civilization, as his title advertises. His fourth counterargument draws on ancient history. Slavery was a comparatively benign practice in ancient Greece, while it became a brutal system of economic exploitation in ancient Rome. Slavery in Ethiopia is like slavery in ancient Greece, Kābbādā argues, while the Italians continue the violent tradition of the Romans. When the Fas-

52 Kābbādā Mika'el 1948/1949, 89–90.

53 Ibid., 90.

54 Ibid.

55 Ibid., 79.

cists denounced the persistence of slavery in Ethiopia, they hypocritically omitted to mention that the slavery they practiced was much more destructive than Ethiopia's.

In ancient Greece, slaves carried out housework and manual labour in the homestead, thus leaving their masters free to enjoy leisure and to devote themselves to arts and philosophy. The development of civilization under the Greeks was thus premised on the existence of slavery, since philosophizing as an activity of the intellect could only be pursued if manual tasks and material necessities were delegated to the labour of others: 'the Greeks maintained slaves because they considered them useful in the accomplishment of necessary works in civilisation, works that the citizens, who had occupations of an intellectual order, were not able to take care of'.⁵⁶ Greek slavery was a wrong custom, but aimed at a noble end, and still less brutal than it would become under the Romans: 'the Greeks were not as cruel to their slaves as the Romans, who, to amuse themselves, had some of the poor creatures devoured by ferocious beasts. [...] The Greeks never considered their slaves as beasts, as did the Romans'.⁵⁷ While slavery in ancient Greece was a small-scale, domestic affair, it became big business for the Romans. Kābbādā tells us that slavery under the Romans escalated into an international trade, with large slave markets and financial speculation, and driven by greedy merchants who wanted to make more and more money. People were enslaved for profit—a situation very different from ancient Greece, where people were enslaved for the sake of philosophy and the arts.

This historical excursus has a direct bearing on Ethiopia's situation in the 1940s. Kābbādā uses this description of ancient Rome to take a jab at twentieth-century Italy. He pointedly comments on the absurdity of the Italians subjugating all Ethiopians in the name of freedom from slavery. This is for Kābbādā the equivalent of saying 'as you do not want to abolish slavery, this gives me the right to enslave you!'⁵⁸ The claim is so self-contradictory and hypocritical that Kābbādā does not hide his sarcasm: 'Beautiful justice, the Roman way, which makes us remember the destruction of Carthage'.⁵⁹ The continuity between the unjust Romans in ancient times and the unjust Italians in the twentieth century is clearly drawn.

Ethiopia, on the other hand, is painted by Kābbādā as similar to ancient Greece. Italy's accusations that slavery persists in Ethiopia ignore that slavery in Ethiopia was different from slavery in the West.⁶⁰ In Ethiopia 'slaves led a hap-

⁵⁶ Ibid., 20.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 60.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ One of the most significant scholarly interventions on this point is Yonas Ashine Demisse 2018. Although Kābbādā does not cite it explicitly, for this part of his argument he

py life in proportion to the rank of their masters' and Ethiopia slave trades are 'less brutal in their treatment of slaves than those of other countries'.⁶¹ This is because in Ethiopia, just like in ancient Greece, slavery is 'a necessity in the household' and mostly only took the form of domestic labour.⁶² Slavery 'was oppressive in [ancient] Rome and America, but the situation of the slaves in Ethiopia was much better and the kindness with which their masters treated them was well-known'.⁶³ Contrary to the scale and brutality of slavery in ancient Rome and America,⁶⁴ in Ethiopia enslaved people did not lose all their rights. A master could leave possession and properties to slaves upon death, for example, and in these cases the slaves would share the inheritance with their master's children and blood relatives.⁶⁵ Masters would reward their slaves with gifts of money or cattle, and these gifts would become their legal property.⁶⁶ In some cases, slaves could even lend money back to their own masters.⁶⁷ Slaves could also intermarry with free persons. And while in ancient Rome and America slavery was big business, in Ethiopia 'there was never a slave market'.⁶⁸ As the rest of this volume demonstrates, this claim is historically unfounded, but manages to provide rhetorical ammunition for Kābbādā's argument that the Italians, and not the Ethiopians, were those reproducing the most vicious forms of slavery into the twentieth century.

Ethiopia in World History: From Christianity to the Enlightenment

Christianity represents for Kābbādā a turning point in the history of slavery. Considering the equivalence, he draws between Ethiopia and ancient Greece on the one hand, and Italy and ancient Rome on the other, he predictably argues that the Greeks paved the way for Christianity, while Roman civilization stood opposite to Christian values.⁶⁹ Christianity teaches that all men are equal, that wealth and material possessions are vain, and that it is sinful to pursue earthly glories, vanities and power. These Christian values, for Kābbādā, could not be

must have had in mind the *Fəṭḥa nāgāšt*, the thirteenth-century legal code compiled in Arabic by an Egyptian Copt author and later translated into Gə'əz. The *Fəṭḥa nāgāšt* mandated who could be enslaved, what rights slaves had or did not have, and the circumstances in which slaves had to be freed. More information on this is in Pankhurst 2011 and David B. Spielman's chapter in this volume.

61 Kābbādā Mika'el 1948/1949, 68, 70.

62 Ibid., 64.

63 Ibid., 58.

64 Ibid., 64.

65 Ibid., 70.

66 Ibid.

67 Ibid.

68 Ibid., 70–71.

69 Ibid., 18.

more distant from the values of the greedy, materialist, and power-thirsty Romans. The equality preached by Christianity clashed with the expansion of the slave trade under the Romans and the hierarchical nature of Roman society.

Against the dominant values of the Roman Empire, Christianity offered people the moral tools to understand slavery as an evil and cruel practice. Kābbādā argues that the slave trade diminished in volume after Christianity started spreading, because people started thinking of enslaved people as brothers and sisters, and not anymore as objects to be owned, bought, and sold. The introduction of Christianity meant that the minds of great men were ‘regenerated’ and, as a result of this Christian regeneration, they came to understand slavery as an ‘infamy’.⁷⁰

This process, however, took several centuries to unfold, and we see a recrudescence of slavery before Christian values finally gained substantial ground. Kābbādā condemns the transatlantic slave trade in the firmest possible way, and spends few pages describing the horrors of the trade and the miserable conditions in which enslaved people lived.⁷¹ Peaceful African villages were attacked, and slave traders pushed inland to kidnap those Africans that had escaped towards the interior.⁷² African chiefs were themselves complicit, selling their subjects in exchange for alcohol whenever they felt like having a drink.⁷³ They also signed diplomatic treaties normalizing their relationship with the Europeans, and Kābbādā does not fail to note the irony of treaties ‘of friendship and commerce’ regulating the buying and selling of human beings.⁷⁴ With time, however, people gradually learnt the Christian principle that ‘if one of their fellow beings is reduced to the conditions of a beast of burden or of a sheer instrument, the humiliation extends to them all, because human valour is debased’.⁷⁵ The more civilization advanced, the more people started recognizing slavery as wrong.

With the Enlightenment, finally, Christian arguments about the equality of all human beings generated a strong anti-slavery movement. Enlightenment thinkers, Kābbādā dubiously claims, took a position against slavery, and with the French Revolution abolitionist arguments started to take hold, finally giving ‘dignity’ to civilization.⁷⁶ Paradoxically, however, the Enlightenment is also when European thinkers started disavowing religion. This was for Kābbādā a big mistake that ultimately marked the failure of the Enlightenment project. Kābbādā does not see Christianity and liberalism as mutually contradictory, but

⁷⁰ Ibid., 51.

⁷¹ Ibid., 41–48.

⁷² Ibid., 42.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 70.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 52.

rather co-dependent. Civilization will advance in the future only if the politico-economic principles of liberalism remain anchored in Christian morals; in this sense, liberalism needs Christianity in order to realise its democratic programme to its fullest. Atheist and secularist thinkers like Rousseau, Schopenhauer, Spencer, Darwin, and Voltaire were therefore a harmful influence.⁷⁷ The Enlightenment's rejection of Christianity ultimately led to tyranny and dictatorship. Without a Christian moral foundation, the democratic, liberal ideas of the Enlightenment ended up getting twisted in the service of power, conquest, and exploitation.

For Kābbādā, modern civilization in the West is characterized by this bifurcation between material civilization and spiritual civilization – while the former advanced, the latter remained backwards. Material wealth increased, while religion was abandoned. The rejection of Christianity marked a step backwards for 'spiritual civilization' because 'outside of Christianity, there is no supreme law for man's morality'.⁷⁸ Because of this spiritual decay, what finally led to abolition in the West were economic changes. As long as slavery was profitable, Western countries kept perpetuating the practice, ignoring the moral arguments against it. The decisive change that led to abolition in the West was the mechanization of labour. The new machines made the work of a large number of men 'superfluous'.⁷⁹ Only then did the West finally heed the abolitionist call.

Next, Kābbādā establishes a productive connection between the abolition of slavery and the colonial scramble of the second half of the nineteenth century. The mechanization of labour led to the expansion of industrialization, and the expansion of industrialization increased the need for raw materials essential for industrial production, such as cotton and metals.⁸⁰ This, in turn, triggered a new wave of colonial conquests 'to deprive the people of their colonies of the product of the soil and of all the riches of the underground'.⁸¹ In this sense, 'it would not be stupid to assert that the colonies took the place of slavery'.⁸² This strong statement allows Kābbādā to show that global power asymmetries are constitutive of the modern world, and persisted way past the official abolition of slavery.

Kābbādā concludes that a comparison between Ethiopian and European attitudes towards slavery shows that Ethiopian civilization is far better than European civilization. While it took a long time for Europeans—in their atheism and dismissal of religious ethics—to conclude that slavery is morally wrong, the Ethiopians have always considered slavery a moral disgrace. The trade in Ethio-

77 Ibid., 84.

78 Ibid.

79 Ibid., 93.

80 Ibid., 94–95.

81 Ibid., 95.

82 Ibid.

pia was carried out in secret because, even back in the day, many recognized slavery as unethical: 'even before the [abolitionist] laws were enacted, our people had always branded slavery as an infamy from the moral point of view'.⁸³ This is because, contrary to the West, Ethiopia has never abandoned Christianity.⁸⁴

Of course, this does not mean that all Ethiopians are models of perfect Christian morality. Kābbādā mentions, as we have seen, cases of exploitative regional governors, unscrupulous slave merchants, and wealthy slave owners. However, these figures were exceptions in a political system whose Christian moral underpinnings are promoted and protected by the emperor. This means that for slavery to be abolished in Ethiopia, it was not necessary to wait centuries for people to progress spiritually. It was just the material aspects of civilization that had to progress, and, in these areas, Ethiopia was delayed by its unlucky geographical isolation and by the spiritually backward West itself. The Italian occupation is a perfect example of the European sabotage of Ethiopia's development efforts. The Fascists 'hampered and destroyed everything that Ethiopia had achieved',⁸⁵ exterminating the Ethiopian intelligentsia, banning books, closing schools to maintain all Ethiopians 'in the night of ignorance'.⁸⁶ By contrast, Ethiopia diligently complied to international law, demonstrating its morally superior desire to preserve peace, harmony, and equality among nations. Italy might have been more advanced materially, but Ethiopia is certainly more advanced spiritually.⁸⁷

The tables will turn soon, Kābbādā predicts. If the big nations think they can get away with their tyrannical schemes, they are misguided. 'Some people think that powerful nations can have their own way and are not afraid that they might themselves suffer acts of injustice', and this for Kābbādā is a big mistake: 'the mighty are not better for relying on their strength. God [...] has managed it so that every time men deviate from the path of truth to enter that of force, fearful consequences a thousand times more disastrous for the mighty than the weak ensue'.⁸⁸ This passage reiterates that Kābbādā interprets the inequality of international relations through a Christian lens. Abandoning Christianity meant that Western civilization used its scientific and technological progress to conquer and exploit the rest of the world. Ethiopia should 'emulate' the material advancements of Western civilization, but without abandoning her Christian morals. And precisely because Ethiopia will keep nurturing its spiritual civilization,

83 Ibid., 71.

84 Ibid., 80.

85 Ibid.

86 Ibid., 105.

87 The distinction between 'material civilization' and 'spiritual civilization' is widespread in anticolonial thought and anticolonial nationalisms. See Chatterjee 1993.

88 Kābbādā Mika'el 1948/1949, 89.

once Ḥaylā Šəllase completes his programme of modernizing reforms Ethiopia will achieve an even more advanced civilization than the spiritually flawed Western one. Already a protagonist of global history ('it is a historical fact that in ancient times Ethiopia was crossing the seas, founding colonies, civilizing other peoples, contributing largely to the progress of mankind'),⁸⁹ Ethiopia will keep having a central role to play in the world of the future.

Conclusion

Käbbädä paints for his reader the picture of a rapidly globalizing world: 'the radio is sending its news from dusk to dawn to the four corners of the world, and every day innumerable newspapers are being distributed among the inhabitants of the Earth'.⁹⁰ These new infrastructures promised to bring more closeness, understanding and communication, but led to the very opposite—discord and mutual hatred.⁹¹ This is precisely because the advance in material civilization did not go hand in hand with the advance in spiritual civilization. People 'have become more materialistic and have deviated from the path leading to God'.⁹² As a consequence of this materialism and thirst for profit, the world of the mid-twentieth century is deeply unequal. Slavery might have been abolished, but the industrialized nations replaced it with colonial conquest and oppression. Colonialism perpetuated the same moral infamy of slavery, argues Käbbädä, except now under the paradoxical claims that the colonizers would help the colonized develop, when in practice they undo their previous progress instead, and that the colonizers stand for the values of freedom, when in fact they effectively enslave their colonized subjects. Although the West is at the top of the world, there is something wrong, even backwards, about Western civilization.

Käbbädä seems confident that Ethiopia will have a prominent role to play in the world of the future by virtue of its spiritually advanced Christian heritage. This reasoning enacts two sets of erasures. Firstly, it excludes all non-Christian Ethiopians from projections of Ethiopian nationhood, thus supporting the sets of policies implemented by Ḥaylā Šəllase to assimilate the Ethiopian peripheries to the political culture of the Christian monarchy. Secondly, Käbbädä's reasoning does not apply to other colonized, or otherwise globally marginalized, people, and Käbbädä does not attempt to forge solidarity with other victims of European racism and colonialism. His argument here goes rather in the opposite direction: the Italian invasion of Ethiopia was wrong precisely because Ethiopia, with her glorious imperial and Christian history and with her modernizing emperor, was

89 Ibid., 77.

90 Ibid., 83.

91 Ibid.

92 Ibid.

different from the rest of the colonized world and was already on track to achieve modernization without the need for Western civilizing intervention.

That Kābbādā does not once mention racism in his history of slavery might be due to the same reason. The conceptual framework of the book is heavily influenced by Western historical narratives, for example on the role of classical civilizations as the ‘cradle’ of European philosophy. No mention is made of Asian or South American history; African history is cited only when describing the brutality of the transatlantic slave trade; and as for the Middle East, Kābbādā quickly brushes off the Arab and Ottoman empires as largely inconsequential in world history. Moreover, all the secondary sources cited by Kābbādā are Western scholars. This shows that, in the late 1940s, the Ethiopian intellectual class was still thinking of their country as the ‘smallest of the big nations’ and bidding Western powers for acceptance, although with a much-sharpened sense of the inequality of international society. We will have to wait until the 1960s for Ethiopian elites to turn to the Third World and reconceptualize Ethiopia as the ‘biggest of the small nations’.

Ethiopia and Western Civilisation is nevertheless a powerful exposé of the Eurocentric underpinnings of Western universalism, while at the same time showing how, eight years after the end of the Italian occupation, Ethiopian elites were still grappling with how the Fascist divide and rule policies had exposed the internal tensions of Ethiopia’s assimilationist model of nationhood—tensions that would define Ethiopia’s history for the rest of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first.

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Part 2

Abolition and the Legacies of Slavery

Memories of Slavery and the Slave Trade among the Berta of Western Ethiopia: Past Experiences and Current Perceptions

TAKELE MERID

Summary

This chapter studies the historical memory of slavery and the slave trade among the Berta of western Ethiopia. It also focuses on current understanding of the socioeconomic statuses and social relations of the Berta people concerning their memory. To address the objectives, written sources of published and unpublished archival materials were consulted. Primary sources were also gathered through interviews and conversations with local Berta informants. The findings show that informants have ample knowledge about the enslavement of their ancestors. The late nineteenth century remains central in oral sources, particularly Emperor Mənilək II's expansion to their localities and the collaboration of Šayḥ Ḥʷaǧālī al-Hasan with Mənilək II's agents and the consequences they suffered. Informants also emphasize the role that Ḥʷaǧālī's wife played, who they believe facilitated enslavement of Berta in Sudan. Until today, the Berta at large and particularly their youth, claim that other groups discriminate against them based on the past stigma of enslavement. In fact, it is not uncommon to use derogatory terms to identify and differentiate Berta from others. Of these, *šanqalla* (derogatory reference to darker skin complexion) and *barya* (referring to slave status or descent) are often used to refer to the Berta and to designate their socially, economically, and politically marginalized condition compared with other surrounding communities.

Introduction

Some communities in Ethiopia are still stigmatized for their historical experience of enslavement as a means to justify discrimination and marginalization.¹ In the case of the Berta, both internal and external factors can explain their historical vulnerability to enslavement. First, their position at the border has exposed their communities to subjugation by powerful states and rulers both from Sudan and Ethiopia.² The absence of strong leadership and the co-optation of local leaders also facilitated the raiding and enslavement of the people living in the peripheries of the country. In addition, the expansion of war around the borders was fuelled by the need for a labour force by the warriors and conquerors, and the high profits produced by trading in slaves. In the western peripheries of

1 Slave descendants, or people framed accordingly, across Ethiopia, may have little or less access to resources, there is a negative public attitude towards them, for instance excluding them from marriage arrangements, an absence of the opportunity to make any social, economic or even political contribution, as a result slave descendants often develop low self-confidence and self-esteem.

2 González-Ruibal 2011; Spaulding 1988.

Ethiopia, therefore, the need and demand for slaves who could serve as soldiers was very high, and it uprooted communities in the region.³

Several indigenous ethnic groups live at the frontier of western Ethiopia. The Mao, Komo, Gumuz, Berta, and Šinašša are the titular groups⁴ under the present-day regime of ethnic federalism. Since the early sixteenth century and until the late nineteenth century, indigenous peoples of this area suffered from several expeditions of conquerors who subjected them to enslavement. Since the late nineteenth century most of them were incorporated by the central government of Ethiopia and remained subjugated and enslaved: their human and natural resources exploited and taken away.

In today's Beni Šangul-Gumuz region, the Berta represent the largest of those historically enslaved communities. The Berta suffered from the consequences of wars, invasion, conquest, and enslavement by various external and internal powers active in the country. Today, Berta are still called by many *barya* (ባርያ 'slaves') and *yalsälätänu* (ያለሰለጠኑ 'uncivilized'). The government⁵ itself also considers the region a *h^wala qār* (ኋላ ቀር 'backward').⁶ Despite the historical evidence, Berta's experiences and their perceptions of slavery and slave trade have not been given due attention. Information on the long-term psychological impacts of slavery and the slave trade on the current generation of the Berta remains scant. This chapter focuses on Berta's experiences of slavery and slave trade and the perceptions of their past enslavement that they maintain vis-à-vis their current situation. It also focuses on Berta's identity and the way they perceive themselves and others in their surroundings.

In Ethiopia conceptualizing terms such as slave and slavery is complex because the practice of slavery and slave trade differed markedly across the country and changed over time. In the Christian context, war captives (*mərkoñña*, ጦርኮኛ) historically were seen as a legal and legitimate source of slaves.⁷ Slave status could also be inherited. This was locally known as *yābarya zār* (የባርያ ዘር descendant of slave, or slave lineage), a term that still serves descendants of en-

3 For location, please refer to the general map on p. xvi, fig. 2 of the present volume.

4 Titular groups or owner groups referred to as *wəllağ*, the people counted as indigenous in the ethno-linguistic terms of the federal system.

5 This implies both the federal and regional governments. In the federal system there are five so called 'backward' regional states. These are Beni Šangul, Gambella, 'Afar, Somali, and Harari.

6 They are lagging due to historical injustices, including that of historical enslavement.

7 This seems attributed to the principle related to *Fəṭḥa nāgāšt*, 'the law of the kings'. This law is the Christian code of medieval Ethiopia, concerned with various aspects of Ethiopian slavery, including ownership, inheritance and purchase of slaves captured during warfare. The enslaving of war captives was justified by Biblical Writ (cf. Pankhurst 2011; Strauss 1968; Takele Merid and Meckelburg 2024).

slaved individuals. Hence, there were inherited slaves (የተወረሰ ባርያ, *yätawäräsä barya*) and slaves born into a household (ወላጅ ባርያ, *wəllağ barya*).

In western Ethiopia slavery was no less complex. Berta were enslaved to serve in goldmines, as military slaves and were raided and traded both in Ethiopia and the Sudan. Household slaves across Sudan, known as *muwallad* in Arabic, descended from Berta.⁸ Yet as slaves they were also brought to Addis Abāba until the twentieth century, where they served in local courts.⁹

Given the above concept and characteristics of historical slavery, it is equally important to pay attention to the trajectories, the continuities, and the discontinuities of slavery in the social fabric of Ethiopia. This is useful to reflect on the past and present identity and perceptions of the Berta. We may claim that after the abolition of slavery and slave trade in the country in general and in the western parts of Ethiopia in particular, there has been only a temporal disruption or discontinuity in practices of enslavement and slavery. Practices of slavery were transformed into other practices like feudal serfdom after World War II, thereby facilitating the reproduction of intergenerational stigmas of slavery that remain very relevant. As an institution, slavery promoted marginalization and vulnerability, even after its abolition. Since the early 1940s, though slavery was officially abolished, no efforts were made to eradicate the characteristics and conditions that ex-slaves and their descendants live in and suffer from.

The perspective of a post-slavery situation suggests that in societies that have experienced slavery and abolition, the past continues to have a significant impact on present-day society. Even after the abolition of slavery, the effects of slavery continue to be felt in the lives of former slaves and their descendants. These effects include social, economic, cultural, political, and psychological problems persisting long after the legal abolition of slavery. These issues can manifest in various forms, such as discrimination, poverty, lack of access to education and healthcare, and cultural erasure, and prove that the effects of historical events such as slavery can have long-lasting and far-reaching consequences for generations to come.¹⁰

This chapter focuses on the current existing living conditions and perceptions of the Berta people in relation to their past: enslavement, slavery and slave trade and the perception of themselves and how others react in relation to their experiences.¹¹ For that purpose, secondary and primary sources have been used. Secondary sources of published and unpublished materials are useful to understand the ethno-historical situation of the Berta, particularly in relation to their enslavement. They are also important for the purpose of explaining the general

8 Spaulding 1988, 31.

9 Abdussamad H. Ahmad 1999; James 2007; Johnson 1986; Meckelburg 2015.

10 Lecocq and Hahonou 2015.

11 Lecocq and Pelckmans 2023.

context in which slavery and slave trade were widespread until the mid-1930s. Primary sources were accessed during fieldwork conducted between 2 October and 17 November 2018, in four *wärādas* (districts) of the Asosa Zone in the Beni Šangul-Gumuz region (Asosa, H^womoša, Šärköle and Mänge). I conducted interviews with twenty-six informants and held five Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with elders from different socioeconomic backgrounds as well as with family members of ex-slaves and descendants of slaves. Perception is a process by which people recognize, understand and analyse information and events they have experienced in the past or at present.¹² Thus, both interviews and FGDs were useful in gathering data pertaining to the perception of slavery and the slave trade by Berta people in their locality. I focused attention on both individual informants and collective discussions. Study participants were able to narrate their past life experiences in relation to the present. Informants' perceptions (of self and others) in relation to their past experiences were gathered via in-depth interviews.

Placing the Berta in the Beni Šangul-Gumuz Region

Beni Šangul-Gumuz is one of the nine regions of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, it borders the Republic of the Sudan, South Sudan, the Amhara Regional State, and Oromia Regional State. Among the indigenous groups living in this region are Berta (25%), Gumuz (21%), Šinašša (7.7%), Mao (2%), and Komo (1%).¹³ There is also a significant number of non-indigenous groups living in this region, that have migrated from neighbouring regions. These are mainly the Amhara, Oromo and Agäw. Since the sixteenth century this area has been known as a slave reservoir for the various states and powers that invaded the region.¹⁴ The population was largely decentralized and thus easy prey for the slave raids feeding both the Nile and Red Sea slave trade, both of these routes culminated in western Ethiopia.¹⁵

The Berta live to the south of the Blue Nile and in the Sudan¹⁶. Alessandro Triulzi suggests that the word 'slave' is often attached to the name Berta among the Arabs of northern Sudan, illustrating the social stigma attached to them.¹⁷ Furthermore, the Berta in Beni Šangul are known by the name *ğäbälawi* used by Arab traders, and by the name *šanqalla* used by non-Berta communities in Ethiopia. At the end of the nineteenth century, the *ğäbälawi* intermarried with trad-

12 Ou 2017.

13 Population Census Commission 2008.

14 Bahru Zewde 1976; Triulzi 1981a.

15 Lovejoy 2000, 153.

16 In the Sudan, these are also called Šilluk or Tornasi. But these Berta groups are not the focus of this paper.

17 Triulzi 1981a, 2.

ers who came from northern Sudan to the area. This new elite later became known as *waṭāwīt*.¹⁸ Oral histories and written evidence also confirm that the Berta came under the rule of the *waṭāwīt* since the early nineteenth century.¹⁹ Over time they controlled Asosa/Aqoldi, H^womoša and Mänge areas, and are known for their rivalries over the control of the area and the subjugation of the indigenous Berta communities. Most of the informants, however, prefer to be called Bela Šangul; reference to a sacred stone located in a mountain in the Mänge district, which the Berta also consider a place they settled originally. The stone is considered to be the symbol of their unity.²⁰

The social organization of the Berta is structured into several clans: Fa-Undi, Fa-Šita, Fa-H^womoš, Fa-Qoldi, Fa-Tsore, Fa-Aracabia, Fa-Alahangia, Fa-Asurakab, Fa-Fazaqalu, etc. Berta clans and sub-clans vanished in the course of time, probably due to the depopulation imposed by the pervasive nature of slave raiding, war, conquest, slavery, and slave trade in the area. Contemporary socio-political division runs along the Mayu (the former *waṭāwīt*), the Fadasi (of Bambasi) and the Fa-Kunkun, who consider themselves to be ‘pure’ Berta people. Conflicts can rage among these groups, especially between Mayu and Fa-Kunkun as the former consider themselves to be superior to the latter.²¹ The language of the Bertas belongs to the Nilo-Saharan group. The Arab speaking Sudanese call it *rutana*, used for all non-Arabic local languages. Arabic and Afaan Oromo are widely spoken. Amharic is the language of the government. This is mainly due to the interactions that existed between the Berta on the one hand, and the slave raiders, conquerors, traders, and brokers in the region on the other. It is often said that the Berta are sandwiched between conquerors from both the east and the west. Prior to the arrival in the late 1890s of the Ethiopian government in the area, the Mahdiyya lay claim to it.²² Hence, the majority of Berta are followers of Islam, but some remain followers of their traditional religion.

The Berta practice mixed economic activities. Some households practice agriculture (shifting cultivation) as the primary subsistence. However, the land available is being abandoned due to climate change and the sale of their lands to investors. Traditional gold mining was Berta’s occupation both when they were enslaved and after the abolition of slavery. They were considered to be skilful in panning gold. However, currently, this occupation has been undertaken by others, non-indigenous to the area who are supported by the military on the border. The trade route between Asosa/Aqoldi in Beni Šangul

18 This means ‘mixed’, of the indigenous Berta and the Sudanese Arabs (Triulzi 1981b).

19 González-Ruibal 2014.

20 Triulzi 1981b.

21 González-Ruibal 2014.

22 Triulzi 1975.

and eastern Sudan has been Berta's historical trade route but is now controlled by Ethiopian government functionaries. Some Berta households also produce artefacts for the local market. In general, the Berta have lost their traditional goldfields, trade routes, forest as well as agricultural lands and only few remain with their plots of lands on homesteads. They are also engaged in labour market in the small towns.

Ethno-Historical Evidence of Berta's Enslavement

The literature on the slave trade in the region is simultaneously rich and fragmented. The Funj state and the Ethiopia highland kingdoms competed in the region for political control and resources which included slaves.²³ Existing sources show the area was exposed to slave raids and trading since at least the fifteenth and sixteenth century.²⁴ From the sixteenth century Sinnār exported 1500 slaves annually.²⁵ From the seventeenth century on, Arabic-speaking Sudanese known among the indigenous Berta as '*waṭāwīt*' enslaved people in non-Arab, non-Muslim communities in the southern Sudan and adjacent territories.²⁶ The Berta were specifically targeted by the *waṭāwīt* as, at the time, they were not Muslims. At first, the *waṭāwīt* became middlemen between the Arab merchants (who came from North Africa and South Arabia) and the local markets in Berta land. They also became slave dealers and exporters after enslaving people in indigenous communities. Through time, the *waṭāwīt* intermarried with local Berta and gave birth to patron-client relationships that eventually became equivalent to slave-master relationship between themselves and the local Berta.²⁷

In parts of western Ethiopia and eastern Sudan, slavery and slave trade reached its peak under the Turco-Egyptian domination of the region during the nineteenth century. In this period, enslavement for military purpose was prevalent and directly affected the indigenous communities. During the Mahdist revolt in the late nineteenth century in the Sudan, the Berta suffered greatly under the Sudanese slave raiders as they were acutely in need of military personnel.²⁸

The Mätämma-Qallabat route was a major outlet through which most slaves were exported to the north.²⁹ Numbers of slaves, though hard to come by, changed throughout the centuries, but may have reached 17,000 in the eighteenth and nineteenth century annually along the major trade route Mätämma-

23 Spaulding 1985.

24 Pankhurst 1997.

25 Lovejoy 2000, 72.

26 Sikainga 1996; Spaulding 1985.

27 Abdussamad H. Ahmad 1999; Meckelburg 2015.

28 Nur 1971.

29 Pankhurst 1964.

Qallabat.³⁰ But the slave trade from the Ethiopian Sudanese borderlands, connected to a complex web across Ethiopia to the Red Sea and into Sudan. Slaves came from and crossed in both directions. Until the late nineteenth century, Šendi was the major locus for the slave trade in the Sudan, connecting not only to Sawakin on the Red Sea but also to Dongola town in Sudan, where slaves ‘were sold locally to different pastoral or cultivating ethnic groups in the area’.³¹

Elders remember major marketplaces of slaves in the territory of Beni Šangul and even other slave markets outside of the area. They speak of marketplaces in Kurmuk and Šärkole, where several enslaved Bertas and other enslaved people were gathered and then shipped to Mätämma-Qallabat. Other items such as gold and handicrafts were sold in these markets too. Several elders noted that beyond their immediate area, *Suq-al-Qallabat* was infamous as a prominent slave market situated at the border of what is now known as Mätämma. This market was a key point for the trade of slaves originating from Ethiopia. The region supplying slaves to this transit market extended southwards into the Beni Šangul area. From Qallabat, the slaves were transported to markets in Sinnār and Šendi, with some being sent directly to Sawakin on the Red Sea coast.³² Although most of the study participants were unaware of the exact destinations of their enslaved relatives, some mentioned that enslaved Berta individuals were taken to a location they referred to as Sinnār and to various Arab states, particularly in South Arabia. Numbers become sketchier at the turn of the twentieth century, but studies suggest a much more fragmented and petty trade. From the late nineteenth century until the 1930s ‘Bela Šangul exported 200–500 slaves annually’.³³

Following this political incorporation of Beni Šangul into the Ethiopian empire, local rulers started to pay tribute in gold and slaves to the courts of Emperors Mənilək II and Ḥaylä Šəllase. Thus, adding a second frontier of Berta enslavement which in the 1920s and 1930s, was conducted by the two sides. Local rulers enslaved Berta for export to the Sudan and for tribute to Addis Abäba. Young people from the Berta, usually under 35 years old, ‘clearly formed the great bulk of the slaves exported from Ethiopia to the Sudan’.³⁴ Rulers of Beni Šangul (Bela Šangul) played a crucial role in this trade. In the first quarter of the twentieth century, Šayḥ Ḥ^wağālī and his wife *al-Sitt* Amina, also known as *Asit* Amna, sold thousands of the slaves they received as tribute, to Sudanese merchants. In this

30 Moore-Harell 1998; Pankhurst 1964.

31 Abdel Ghaffar M. Ahmed 2007, 7.

32 Ibid.

33 Abdussamad H. Ahmad 1999, 438.

34 Bahru Zewde 1976, 208. Spaulding’s assessment of the papers of British colonial administrator Anthony Arkell, who liberated and documented slaves captured from Ethiopia, suggests the same, followed by Komo and Oromo (Spaulding 1988, 42). The problem of determining ethnicity in these frontier contexts nonetheless proves a flawed exercise due to migration and language vitality.

process, H^waḡalī kept his own share in the form of a tax. The facilitators were H^waḡalī's brothers and his extended family members, who retained illicit networks of trade circumventing British, and, by proxy, Sudanese, and Ethiopian attempts at suppressing the trade.

After the early 1940s, smugglers from the Sudan and Ethiopian borders sought people to enslave for business profit and labour services. In fact, until in the late 1980s, the Arab countries of North Africa (such as Egypt) and the Middle East were importing slaves and practicing slavery.³⁵

With the help of raiders kidnapping people in villages around the border, the imperial government of Ethiopia enslaved Berta people to use them as domestic servants and farmers until the mid-1930s. Thus, in Ethiopia, slavery has created a history of marginal incorporation into Ethiopia and is thus remembered as trauma and lives on as part of a mode of explanation for the present-day marginalization of the Berta. Documentation of the history of Berta's enslavement is much fragmented and explained by only few scholars. In the following the memory of slavery is discussed to show how the past remains relevant in the current interactions of the people in the western Ethiopia.³⁶

Slavery and Slave Trade: Facts and Events of Berta's Experiences

The oral history and commemoration of slavery is an evolving field. It may, as Wendy James pointed out, provide sharper 'distinctions such as those between the subjugation of slaves for tribute, taxation, military recruitment, commercial profit or as judicial punishment are somewhat challenging, let alone the later discriminations of status within the holding society'.³⁷ The paper will now demonstrate how oral data can be utilized to reconstruct the patterns of enslavement and how these contours of memory can be used to explain the present socio-political conditions.

In the study area's four *wärādas*, the elders described how slavery was rampant in their locality and had a devastating impact on their human and environmental resources and socioeconomic institutions. Although enslavement was significant in earlier periods, most informants focused on the period of Emperor Mənilək II's expansion. They discussed how they were enslaved and forced to provide tribute in labour services and gold. According to the informants, the practice of enslavement was common after the arrival of Mənilək II's soldiers in their localities and continued until the *Därg* regime took over in 1974. Prior to the early

35 Walz and Cuno 2010.

36 Cf. Meckelburg 2015.

37 James 1988, 134.

1940s, raiding and enslavement were openly practiced in collaboration with local leaders who were not true Bertas.³⁸

One of the most significant memories of the informants in Aqoldi (Asosa), H^womoša, Šerkole, and Mänge *wārādas* is that of Šayh H^wağalī al-Ḥasan, remembered for subjugating the indigenous Berta local leaders and people. He is also remembered for collaborating with outsiders in the slave trade, for he and his wives were involved in the business of trading enslaved people, kidnapped from Berta villages to be sold in Sudan or sent as tribute to the central Ethiopian government. Thirdly, he took people in various ways e.g., as tribute, punishment for households that opposed him, in response to external demands, or as a form of tax when slave dealers passed through his territories, particularly via Aqoldi. He then resold these captives in other localities.

As an informant explained, the Berta people lived along the plains of Dabus River and cultivated different cereals for consumption but were forced to retreat to unproductive lands to escape those enemies that invaded their villages. In the late 1920s, Šayh H^wağalī introduced the tribute of children, known as *yäləğ-gəbər* (የልጅ ግብር).³⁹ This demand for child slaves increased both domestically and in foreign lands. Every Berta household had to provide their firstborn child, and should they fail to do so, they were then required to provide two children, a male and a female, for H^wağalī's house. The responsibility in managing this task fell to H^wağalī's family members, his brothers in Ethiopian territory, while his wives were responsible in Sudan. The Berta households lost many members, and many of the enslaved children were traded or used to serve the rulers' households. Of the enslaved who were traded, Berta children between 7 and 15 years old were the most expensive.⁴⁰

Informants explain that there were different uprisings against the reign of Šayh H^wağalī al-Ḥasan mainly opposing the 'evil practices of slavery'. Particularly at the end of the 1920s and beginning of the 1930s the Berta people of H^womoša and Bela Šangul proper (currently Mänge and Undulu areas) rebelled against the governorship of H^wağalī of Asosa. In the early 1930s, there were also revolts⁴¹ largely triggered by extensive slave raids and labour exploitation that Šayh H^wağalī and his extended family had imposed on the region. In fact, they wanted gold to supply to the central government, and captives to sell to the Arabs, who were known locally as *ğallaba*.

38 This is to give mention to the fact that *waṭāwīṭ* Arabs who enslaved the indigenous Berta did actually, in time, come to consider themselves Berta.

39 Abdussamad H. Ahmad 1999.

40 Bahru Zewde 1976.

41 Among the revolts, some were led by Mustafa Abdu-Rahman of Bela Šangul and Musa Mahmud of H^womoša though both were defeated. The burden of taxation laid on the people also aggravated the revolts in Bambasi area. However, Šayh H^wağalī was never defeated by the revolts.

A 94-year-old Berta informant related the history his father had narrated to him of the enslavement of local Berta in general and of his relatives. According to him,

Yes, it is true; our ancestors were enslaved and sold by traders who were passing through our localities. Our ancestors, men and women, were taken away to the Sudan and only a few of them escaped and returned back while most of them never returned home. When raiders arrived in the area, they intensively hunt individuals, beat those who resisted and tie their hands to their backside.⁴²

The raiders used to export slaves taken from Berta to the Sudan either to export them further north or to exploit their labour in the British plantations in the Sudan. Abdullahi also told of his own life experience. According to him,

After the Italians evacuated from the area, in the early 1940s,⁴³ I and my elder brother were about 12 and 14 years old respectively. While following our cattle, we were kidnapped and enslaved by a group of raiders in the field of H^womoša. We were taken somewhere in the jungle that we did not know.⁴⁴ At daytime, we used to stay in the jungle with the raiders and travel at night. In the second day, we travelled to a place where we found several other Bertas whom we did not know by name. We saw that some of them were chained in the forest while others were not. During one-night troops opened gunfire at the raiders while we were still in the jungle. At this time many of them escaped while others caught by the soldiers. In that moment I was separated from my brother, and I never knew what happened to him and never got him back. It was after a few weeks that I returned to my home H^womoša supported by the soldiers who were in the area. Though I did not exactly know where these soldiers came from, but later I was informed that they were British soldiers of Sudanese origin, trained by the British.

According to informants, slave owners employed a divide and rule strategy to sustain their business of trading in slaves by compelling ‘captive brothers’ by force to raid their own relatives in the villages. In this way, Berta captives were forced to raid their relatives and subjugate men, women and children for their new masters. ‘This situation negatively affects the interaction and relationships we could have among ourselves today. Today, we mistrust each other and are

42 11 November 2018, H^womoša.

43 He did not exactly remember the year but refers the Italian occupation in the 1940s.

44 He did also exactly remember the place; it might be on the border between Ethiopia and the Sudan.

divided among ourselves.⁴⁵ This division was not Berta's culture, and in the earlier times we were united and one'.⁴⁶

Berta elders also explain that in order to easily distinguish between them and the *waṭāwīt* (Arabized Bertas), they introduced different types of scarification on their cheeks.⁴⁷ The scars are used as symbols to target and identify various Berta groups: the *waṭāwīt* families, the Mayo (Mayu)⁴⁸ and the indigenous Berta sub-clans.

In addition to experiences of enslavement, informants explain that there were situations when they and their ancestors were forced to provide free labour (**ጨሰኝነት**, *čisāññānät*) to local rulers and to the rulers assigned by the central government. They claim this is part of their subjugation and exploitation. Until the period of the Italian occupation everyone had to provide free labour to *waṭāwīt*, officials, and the Ethiopian aristocracy—and, if refused, punishment was imposed in the form of a tribute in children, between 3 and 10 years old. The Berta had to serve local ruling families and the *balabats*, and to accomplish all indoor and outdoor duties and activities.

As study participants elaborated, they not only lost their children, their lands, cattle, forest and other livelihood sources; they also lost their socioeconomic institutions. Of these institutions, for example, is *šul bongoru* (an indigenous Berta term, meaning a big guesthouse) or *ḥalwa* (in Arabic). In Berta tradition, each household head used to build a big hut where friends, elders and male guests gathered and discussed several issues at length, exchanged information, managed conflicts, and analysed different social and economic matters. The *ḥalwa* was also a place where elders used to socialize their children, give advice, and drink coffee; it is an institution through which male parents transfer their cultural practices to the next generation. More importantly, it was used to serve as a traditional court. In addition to the *ḥalwa* there were other indigenous institutional arrangements common among the Berta, but they were abandoned due to the raids and the pervasive enslavements, while some people were assimilated within the cultures of the rulers.

45 He indicated, for instance, that Fa-Aqoldi do not trust Fa-Ḥ^womoša and vice versa.

46 13 November 2018, Ḥ^womoša.

47 For instance, indigenous Berta elders still have various symbols like three parallel lines walled on both sides of their cheeks, whereas Berta's young generation do not have such marks. Informants provide different interpretations for the symbols, which, of course, need further investigation.

48 These are the *waṭāwīt* who were intermarried and mixed with the indigenous Berta.

Berta's Perceptions of Self and Others

Until today, the legacy of slavery remains important in Berta's current lives, as they live in 'a system of economic, social and cultural inequalities'.⁴⁹ In the context of a post-slavery society, Berta's 'unequal' relations with other ethnic groups can be understood as a legacy of the enslavement of their ancestors and the negative condition related to it. The fragmented history of slavery is already embodied in terms of ethno-naming in the current political system. There are different terms used to refer to Berta by master groups, such as *ġābālawi*, which overlap in their processes of subjection. However, some of these terms are derogatory and pejorative, reflecting the historical and socioeconomic positions of the Berta people.

Informants have explained that *ġābālawi*, for example, is not a name that represents the Berta people. Instead, it is a term used in a derogatory manner referring to the Berta as 'weak' and 'subjugated'. This name was originally given to Fa-Mänge, a Berta group that was conquered by the Funġ for the first time.

Similarly, other pejorative terms used by highlanders, such as *barya*, are also attributed to the Berta's past socioeconomic positions. Some informants even dislike the name Berta itself claiming it came from the Arab Sudan and was used to refer to 'slaves'. However, there are other informants who believe that Berta has a positive connotation, as it relates to the 'first father' of the Berta people.

Despite these differing opinions on the Berta name, the Berta people have been historically marginalized and discriminated against.⁵⁰ They have been referred to as *umm* (savages), *ujum* (ignorant), *kuffar* (misbehaving people), and *abid* (slaves) by people of Sudanese origin.

Marginalization can be understood as a product of societal and spatial constructs that focus on human dimensions, such as demography, religion, culture, social structure (such as caste, hierarchy, class, ethnicity, and gender), economics, and politics, in connection to access to resources. Local informants report that their ancestors suffered from slavery and that they currently experience discrimination from the government and non-indigenous settlers. Consequently, they tend to avoid going to towns and prefer to remain in rural areas.

According to the Asosa Zone Administration, other ethnic groups, mainly Amhara and Oromo populations, dominate over 85 per cent of Asosa town, which positions the Berta as inferior in terms of population size and access to benefits such as job opportunities. It appears that the discrimination they experi-

49 Lecocq and Hahonou 2015, 181–182.

50 It is important to note that the name Berta is regarded as derogatory by many, as having a connotation of slave (see also Yirga Tesema 1973, 17 and Bekele Geleta 1968, 25). It is before this background that in 2022 the Regional Council approved the renaming of the Berta nation as Beni Šangul nation in the effort to reversing the stigma attached to the derogatory use of the name (informants in the Asosa Zone Administration Office, 8 October 2022).

ence in towns has prompted the Berta to isolate themselves from non-indigenous social groups in the area to avoid being socially constructed as marginalized. However, Berta youths who travel to towns in search of work often find themselves in conflicts with non-indigenous groups, including law enforcement officials, because they feel mistreated.

Due to the socio-economic, political, and environmental marginalization they face from the government and other ethnic groups, Berta communities often feel insecure. They do not control any economic sectors such as gold mining, trade, and land ownership, which keeps them entrenched in poverty at the bottom of the social structure. Consequently, they have little to no access to development interventions launched by the Ethiopian government, which perpetuates their marginalization. As a coping mechanism, they practice an endogamous marriage system, which further isolates them from others.

This is exacerbated by the fact that the Beni Šangul region and its people remain on the periphery of Ethiopia. One of the recent phenomena they have witnessed, that informants explained is that, for instance, neither Gumuz nor Berta youth seem employed to work on the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, though the dam is being built on their land. Similarly, other investors have a negative attitude towards the Berta youth and do not employ them in their investment companies.

In Beni Šangul-Gumuz, the authorities consider the land to be a ‘no man’s land’ and have allotted it to investors, leaving the Berta with infertile land and forced to compete with investors for the remaining cultivable land. However, due to their limited competence, they are typically unable to control it effectively. As a result, the Berta have retreated to forest areas as a way of life, but this has become increasingly challenging due to deforestation issues. Consequently, the Berta’s shift to cultivation as a livelihood strategy and economic activity has become highly problematic their livelihoods and all increasingly endangered. They are now forced to lead a desperate life or adapt to new ways of living, such as becoming labourers.

Berta informants report, that for centuries, their gold mining areas have been exploited by external groups who dominated their localities. One informant explained that ‘we only served as labourers in the goldfields, and it was only recently that we started to take care of them as they were controlled by powerful groups.’⁵¹

However, in the mid-1990s, the goldfields were re-taken by newly arrived groups. During a focus group discussion, a participant highlighted the situation, which received the approval of others:

51 They refer to these powerful groups who were mainly the *balabats* and officials assigned by the central government to govern the area.

Now we can say there are three groups of gold miners in the area: the first one is the newcomers, non-natives, who are also powerful, come to the area with machines, use the external market to sell gold and are backed by the government (by the military defence on the border between Ethiopia and the Sudan). The second is migrants who learned gold mining activity from the Berta or who recently engaged in the activity with the support of investors. The third is the natives, Berta traditional gold miners, who do not have the power to claim their rights.⁵²

Most informants and participants in focus group discussions assert and maintain that their present marginalization is a continuation of the inferior status they have endured in the past. They perceive that their past legacy is exerting a substantial impact on them in various ways. Drawing on their historical experiences, government officials and the non-indigenous populace in their vicinity presume that the Berta people lack the capability to confront them. This can be interpreted as Berta's current predicament being a manifestation of the 'persistent legacies of past hierarchical and oppressive structures'.⁵³

Conclusion

Berta people in western Ethiopia had been subjugated and enslaved by different powerful groups arriving in the area. Historically they have been enslaved and categorized as 'backward' and 'uncivilized'. They were also considered as people who could not claim their socio-economic and political rights. Currently, their life experiences show that there is a negative causal relationship between Bertas' historical enslavement and their current ways of life. This can be seen in different ways. One is that after the official abolition of slavery in the country in the early 1940s, ex-slaves and their descendants were not formally incorporated into the larger national economy. In this regard, the agrarian Ethiopian economy has never incorporated the freed labour of ex-slaves, and successive Ethiopian governments did not work towards the development of ex-slaves in general and the Berta people. The Berta, in this case, represent a people marginalized, discriminated, poor, and excluded from the benefits of the national economy while their resources have been taken away by other social groups. Secondly, the abolition of slavery was not facilitated by the expansion of modern education and other working environments that could change the ways of thinking on the position of marginalized groups. Awareness should have been promoted among the people aside from law enforcement. The perception that prevails is that for indigenous Berta people the abolition of slavery did not work, for until the 1970s and 1980s Berta individuals were kidnapped by unknown groups in Beni Šan-

⁵² Berta informant, 12 October 2018, Asosa.

⁵³ Rossi 2015, 303.

gul. This seems mainly due to the existence of slave receiving societies continuing until the late twentieth century and to the persistence of social and economic patterns detrimental to the Berta.

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Competing Narratives of Status Relating to Slave Descent among the Dube People of the Wabi Šäbälle Valley and their Neighbours, South-Eastern Ethiopia*

KEFYALEW TESSEMA SEMU†

Summary

As in many regions of Ethiopia, the Wabi Šäbälle valley exhibits rampant social status stratification underpinned by historical slavery, which continues to prevail in the present. This article investigates divergent narratives of the Dube people's status related to slave descent, based on the analysis of oral and written sources. The Dube are riverine peoples who live on inhabitable floodplains conducive to farming along the Wabi Šäbälle and other perennial rivers in south-eastern Ethiopia. Findings show a firmly institutionalized slavery among the diverse societies of the Wabi Šäbälle valley. Pervasive narratives associate the Dube people with slavery. They have been pejoratively labelled by the Somali pastoralists as 'Adone', meaning 'slave', and have experienced a history of marginalization from their neighbours. Some of their Arsi Oromo neighbours also referred to them by the slightly modified term 'Adoonaa'. There is insufficient evidence to prove the Dube were actually a group of maroons and runaway slaves as depicted by their neighbours. The Dube, unsurprisingly, reject such categorization as an abomination, citing physiognomic, socio-economic, and cultural differences from their neighbours. Moreover, Dube elders claim it was the pastoralists who assimilated some communities of slave descent and occupational 'caste' groups over time. As a result, these divergent narratives have created social boundaries and led to sporadic conflicts between the Dube and their pastoralist neighbours to this day.

Introduction

The Wabi Šäbälle River valley, one the longest rivers of Ethiopia, is home to diverse societies. Its middle and lower courses flow through hot and arid areas,

- * Due to the regrettable and untimely passing of the author in a tragic accident on 20 May 2023, the editors have completed his article, originally presented during the SLAFNET project's Spring School held at the Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Abäba, 15–19 April 2019. While some inconsistencies existed that normally would have been cleared up with the author, expert advice has been received from Francesca Declich, who pointed out some problem in the study landscape. We would like to thank Francesca Declich for her invaluable advice. Although any remaining issues are the editors' responsibility, we firmly believe the ethnic and social constellations and debates depicted and surveyed in this article certainly merit publication. We hope there will be interest in further studies of the complex social interactions within this little-examined area of Ethiopia and the social boundaries created by stereotyping in an under-researched context. We wish for the reader to understand this as a research note in which the researcher began to work through the complex meanings of slavery, its historical trajectories, and strategies of avoidance.

and the river is the only source of fresh water for humans and animals alike. This made the Wabi Šābälle River a melting pot of societies from the Bale and Ogaden lowlands.

The Dube are (in most cases) endogamous communities consisting of four lineages (Gasas, Wesse, Reer Abar, and Reer Hussein) with an estimated population of over 170,000.¹ They speak *af*-Dube (Dube language) which has a significant percentage of lexicographical difference to Somali language in their immediate proximity (*af-maxariti*) and is more related to *af-maymay* languages spoken in southern Somalia.²

The Dube live in the proximity of Somali pastoralists and semi-pastoralists such as the Awlihan Afghab, Gherri, Dewedi, Degodi, Hawiyya, Karanle, Rahanweyn, Adenker, Amaden, and Sheikash Somalis living in and around the Afdher Zone of Somali Region. The Arsi Oromo pastoralists and semi-pastoralists clans such as the Rayitu, Hawatu, Ilani, Fijja, Garjeda, Sarar, Beltu, Dawwe, and others settle the eastern lowlands of Bale Zone of Oromia. Lastly, riverine cultivators, who speak their own distinct dialects as well as Somali and *Afan* Oromo languages, inhabit the Wabi Šābälle River valley as closer neighbours of the Dube. They include the Reer Barre, Gherri-Mero, Girrira, Gurre, Degine, Kerenle, and Šabeli.³

In this paper I will discuss social memory embedded in salient narratives of social categorization related to slavery among the societies of the region. Oral traditions that I have collected during fieldwork for my PhD dissertation provided traces of the institution of slavery in the region.⁴ Due to the institutionalization of slavery, there exists a widespread tradition among societies of the region to describe and associate certain physiognomic features to the history of slavery. These features include black skin pigmentation, curlier hair, muscular body, etc. Individuals possessing such features are dubbed ‘*barəč*’ or ‘*barəčo*’ a derivate of the Amharic term ‘*barya*’, slave.⁵ The Dube themselves refute the stigma of slave descent, emphasizing their Bantu origins instead. What unfolds is a discursive stalemate in which old patterns of bondage, vassalage, and slavery are convoluted with racial stereotyping. This has resulted in entrenched social boundaries, positioning the Dube at the lower end of the social stratum to this day.

1 In some cases, the Dube intermarry with riverine communities and in rare cases with the Arsi, Somali and others.

2 Webersik 2004, 525. *Af-maymay* refers to dialects of Somali language which are not mutually intelligible with those of *af-maxariti* dialects spoken by northern Somalis including the Ogaden of the Wabi Šābälle valley.

3 Kefyalew Tessema 2020, 29–30.

4 Ibid.

5 These terms often used jokingly today across Ethiopia, reinforce social and cultural stratification and racialization and can be offensive to members of societies with population predominantly having these features and associated with slavery.

Slavery along the Wabi Šäbälle and Ganaalee Valleys

Particularly in the first half the nineteenth century, the Ganaalee and Wabi Šäbälle Rivers served as trade routes for slaves coming through and from south-eastern Ethiopia towards the Indian Ocean.⁶ Slavery along these routes increased due to the need for African slaves in Arabia and expansion of plantation agriculture on the islands of Zanzibar and Lamu and along the Juba and Šäbälle Rivers.⁷ Estimates acknowledge about 300,000 slaves were absorbed on the Bajun and Benadir coasts in the nineteenth century. This in turn led to a tremendous increase of slave population in the above port towns to the extent by which some had a slave population more numerous than local residents. As the slave population increased, plantation owners increased demands on them to work over large areas of lands aiming for profit maximization.⁸

Consequently, to escape the harsh conditions under their masters, slaves began to run away and establish their own independent communities.⁹ Some of these communities of runaway slaves in Somalia were the Goša¹⁰ and Zigula¹¹ on the Juba River and Šilda and Makanne on the Šäbälle River.¹² These settle-

6 For the slave trade between Harär and Zayla see Burton 1856, 70 and Cassanelli 1982, 151, 168–169.

7 Esmond and Ryan 1980, 104–107.

8 See *ibid.*, 124. They estimated that over 70 per cent of populations of Lamu area were slaves. Also 4,000 of the 6,000 inhabitants of Mogadishu in 1893 were descendants of emancipated slaves. Slave trade declined in this region since 1897 though it was not legally ended until 1907 in Kenya by British East Africa. It important to distinguish between the presence of ‘plantations’ and a ‘plantation economy’. The latter, which implies a large-scale, systematic agricultural enterprise primarily reliant on enslaved labour, has not been conclusively proven for the Benadir region prior to colonial influence. Although there was some cultivation of cotton, the labour organization in Benadir does not meet the criteria typically associated with a plantation economy.

9 Declich 2000, 25–53; See Declich 1995, 99. As Declich puts it: ‘[t]he earliest large communities of runaway slaves appeared in the Goša area by the middle of the nineteenth century. These comprised people from many different East African cultures, including those generally recognized today as Nyasa, Yao, Makua, Nyamwesi, Kikuyu, Zigua, and Shenzi. One group was homogeneous and numerous enough to retain its language (Chizigula) and are today the largest group defined by language commonality’.

10 The name Goša indicates all riverine people of the Juba River. The name also shows the fugitives who gave rise to runaway slaves as ‘Wa Goša’ as distinct from the ‘Wasugua’ on the southern part of the river.

11 Declich 1995, 104. The Zigula are called *Mushunguli*-mingled name for *Mzigula* meaning person belongs to the Zigula also Zigua. The Zigula tradition of origin says that they left the area near Handeni and Pangani in Tanzania to escape an extremely severe drought.

12 Declich 2000, 31. The data is unavailable for those of runaway slaves along Šäbälle. Declich stated that during Italian colonial rule, many people escaped from the forced la-

ments experienced a tremendous population increases. For example, around 1850–1860 the Goša population was entirely composed of runaway slaves and by 1891 their numbers had increased enormously to around 30,000 to 40,000 people.¹³ This forced some of these communities to expand and find new settlement sites along the Wabi Šäbälle and Ganaalee Rivers of Ethiopia.¹⁴

E. R. Turton asserted that '[t]here has long been a tendency to suggest that Bantu-speaking peoples migrated northwards [...] along the banks of the lower Juba and along the [Wabe-Šäbälle]. There are today a number of negroid groups on the [Wabe-Šäbälle], such as the Shidle, Eile, Dube and Tunni Torre'.¹⁵ This direction of movement of ex-slave communities collectively known as 'Adone' is supported by Dube narratives on their ancestors' origins which will be discussed below.

In summary, there has been a tendency to convolute slave descent with pre-existing Bantu-populations: a key aspect of traditional social stratification in the Bale lowlands was the recognition of physiognomic differences among various communities. This is so, both in the social interaction between groups and reinforced in academic discourses. For instance Ioan Myrddin Lewis stated that 'the skin colour of the Somali is evident of their descent and long-standing relationship with Arabia that generally range from coppery brown to dusky black'.¹⁶ This Asian origin claim of the pastoralist 'Samaale' known as *jeelic* (soft hair) seem to have been the reason to look down up on the Digil cultivators who trace a different descent, i.e. from the Bantu.¹⁷ The Dube and other riverine societies were referred to as '*jareer*' due to their curly hair. They differed from the physi-

bour of the Šäbälle River from before the twentieth century plantations and moved towards the relative freedom of the Juba River.

13 Esmond and Ryan 1980, 118–119. This settlement was believed to have an annual influx of 3000 to 4000 slaves.

14 There is a need for more study about where they escaped from and why. It cannot be assumed they simply escaped 'away from plantations', especially considering the complexity of such movements. Did an entire group escape together? This points to the insufficient knowledge about the exact numbers and social conditions of maroon communities, which formed new, coherent communities, particularly for the case of the Dube. It is more likely that the Dube absorbed runaway slaves into their lineages.

15 See Turton 1975, 524. This introduces complex questions that need further study: the reasons for these Dube to move north along the Juba River might result from the available options of heading either south or north, or political disagreements with the runaway slaves of the Goša. However, it remains unclear if there were truly opportunities to negotiate their escape routes, and whether individuals visited Goša to verify conditions before relocating. Additionally, if such verification occurred, was it already after the abolition of slavery?

16 Lewis 2002, 5; Lewis 2004, 495. Lewis has made several anthropological studies on the Somali.

17 Besteman 1991. Informants: Dube elders, January–July 2018, Addis Abäba.

ognomic features attributed to the Somali particularly a *blacker* skin colour. These physical traits, however, were seen as natural to the Dube people and riverine societies, such as the Reer Barre, Gherri-Mero, and Degine, and were viewed as indicative of their 'true African identity'.¹⁸ These traditional physiognomic differentiations were documented in travellers' accounts using terms 'Negro' or 'Bantu' or 'Black population'.¹⁹ These physiognomic features however are natural to the Dube people and riverine societies like the Reer Barre, Gherri-Mero and Degine. Dube informants therefore stated that their physiognomy is evident of their 'true African identity'.²⁰

The 'Adone' and Dube in Literature: Making a Connection?

Somali pastoralists, who held themselves in higher self-esteem as *biliis* (noble), traditionally viewed the Dube as people descended from slave communities. Thus, Somali tradition viewed the Dube as members of 'the Bantus' whom it labelled as 'low status group'.²¹ For instance, according to a Somali narrative, Somali groups like the Ajuran, Degodi, Gherri, and other Hawiyya lineages owned many slaves of Bantu origin called 'the *jareer*' in the inter-riverine areas of Somalia. They used these slaves, popularly known as 'Adone', to cultivate agricultural fields along the riverbanks and look after livestock at the time. This name was the base upon which to categorize most riverine cultivators as descendants of those slaves.²² This narrative concurs with literature that states 'most Bantu (*jareer*) living in southern Somalia are descendants of Bantu who were enslaved by the Sultan of Zanzibar in the 18th century'.²³

The term 'Adone' has two kinds of usage in the sources. One is in a general reference to riverine communities of the Wabi Šābälle and Ganaalee Rivers.²⁴ The second is its application for groups of communities in the region with presumed descent from slaves. Vinigi Lorenzo Grottanelli observed that

the Somali never troubled to learn and use the proper ethnic names of their Negro neighbours. This would account for the general name applied by the Darood to the Webi Bantu, Addon (slaves) [...]. The Hawiyya, on the other hand, have (borrowed the general term Habešo from

18 Declich 2000, 34. Declich stated that these differences were widened by colonial writers.

19 Swayne 1900, 22; Grottanelli 1972, 382; Braukämper 1977, 19.

20 House of Federation, Peoples Petition Department Archive 2000, 2. As this tradition continued to prevail to the present in some ways, Dube elites exploit it to justify their ethnic difference from the Somali in their quest for a separate ethnic identity.

21 Informants: Dube elders, Gindhir, May 2018; Dube elders, Addis Abäba, February 2017.

22 Informants: Dube elders, Gindhir, May 2018; Dube elders, Addis Abäba, February 2017.

23 Declich 1995, 525; Cassanelli 1982, 168–170.

24 Grottanelli 1972.

the coastal Arabs) [...] because they had no word in their own language to indicate 'Negro'.²⁵

As 'Adone' was used in reference to slaves among much of the Somali speaking communities, the term 'Habäs' was also used by the Arabs to refer to slaves originated in the Ethiopian highlands in general and to Christian captive slaves brought to Indian Ocean coastal areas of the Horn in particular.

The meaning of several words that originated from the term '*addon*' are all akin to the institution of slavery. For example, derivatives of the Somali root term '*addon*' (with meaning in brackets) include '*addon/adoon*' (slave), '*adoon-si*' (slavery or yoke), '*addoomin*' (enslave), '*adoonimo*' (slavish), '*addoon*' (chattel) and '*adoomino*' (bondage). The term designates the status of slave.²⁶ It also has variable pronunciations like '*adoon*', '*adone*' and '*addona*'. All these terms are seen as highly derogatory by the Dube people, who refuse to use them for the purpose of self-identification.²⁷

The entry point to a regional *historiography* of slavery lies in the term '*adone*' and reference to the Dube people.²⁸ Since Dube tradition does not accept a connection with the history of slavery, and Somali tradition rarely memorizes a specific relation of slavery to a particular group among the Dube lineages, it is important to trace how the term was documented in academic research on the Dube's slave status.

Travellers' accounts were the earliest written materials to document the 'Adone' as slaves of the Somali in the last decades of the nineteenth century. These travellers wrote their accounts based on observation and information about names of social groups they had received from their Somali travel guides. The earliest detailed description on the Dube was made by British Officer Major Harald G. C. Swayne in 1893 in southern Somalia. He observed that 'on the [Wabi Šäbälle] a river race called the Adone, also Negroes, were working in the fields and punting rafts on the river for their masters, the Somalis'.²⁹ Here Major Swayne's guides were Somalis whom he reported to have claimed descent from a 'higher race'. Swayne's description 'a river race called "Adone"' therefore

25 Grottanelli 1972, 382. Here it is important to note the Darood Somali used the term '*adone*' to refer to all slaves.

26 See Luling 1987 for the meaning of the terms; Trimmingham 1952, 221, n. 2 for collective use of 'Adone' for the Šabeli and Dube. The Reer Barre and Degine also shares physical features with the Dube that often traditionally used to differentiate them from most ethnic Somali.

27 The last two words i.e. '*adone*' is mostly used in the literature by those who speak Somali as a second language and '*addona*' is the Oromo pronunciation of the Somali word '*ad-donn*'.

28 Smith 1897; Swayne 1900; Swayne 1903; Trimmingham 1952.

29 Swayne 1900, 22. This report was about a group of 'Adone' on the lower Šäbälle River in southern Somalia.

shows that he was reporting the information he had received from his guides.³⁰ His later edition added detailed descriptions in that '[t]he Adone living at Ime [in Ethiopia] have been great cultivators of *jowári* [sorghum?], which they eat'.³¹ Major Swayne spent several days at Imie studying the Dube. He never mentioned the existence of slave-master relations between the Dube and any other society. Swayne instead documented that the Dube were ruled by their traditional chief, Gabba Oboho, who asked him to mediate with Great Britain to become Dube's 'protector'.³²

The second explorer who visited the Dube on the Ganaalee River in Ethiopia was Dr Donaldson Smith in 1896. His description seems somewhat vague in that he observed the Dube were dominated by the Somali clansmen known as the Degodi. He writes, 'the Degodi agreeing to sell me a camel and ten sheep and provide Adone to help us to cross the [Juba] river on their rafts. These Adone were treated as slaves by the Degodi, were forced to do most of the hard work in the fields'.³³ What he meant by 'forced to do most of the hard work' is not clear. The statement that the 'Adone were treated as slaves' does not exactly mean that they were slaves. This means Dube labourers could be employed and harshly treated by individual Degodi employers. Studies based on such travellers' accounts later popularized a slave status narrative on the Dube in the academics.

The next source mentioning the name 'Adone' is Enrico Cerulli's *The Folk Literature of the Galla of Abyssinia*, which referred to them as the 'Addôn' as the southern section of riverine societies scattered all over the Horn of Africa.³⁴ Cerulli draws no connection to slavery. The concept of 'riverine culture' shared by the Dube is simply a key feature of societies generally known as the earliest inhabitants of the Horn region whose 'remnants' inhabit its entire major river systems.³⁵ Another source categorizes these societies as the 'hippopotamus eaters'.³⁶ It is important to note here that Dube tradition and material culture are in line with living along the river banks and eating of the hippo in the past for me-

30 Swayne 1900, 22, 206. Since slaves were generally called 'adone', those slaves Swayne met in Somalia may not have been members of the Dube people. Because after his visit to those in Ethiopia, he made no mention of slavery.

31 Swayne 1903, 211.

32 Ibid., 210. Major Swayne narrated the difficulty he had faced in explaining to the Dube chief that he was not delegated by his government to give protection. He also stated that the Dube had a security issue posed by Ethiopian military campaigns but did not form slave raiders.

33 Smith 1897, 153.

34 See Cerulli 1922, 210. He accepted earlier works describing this people with physical features that resembles remnants of 'the primitive Negrillos and Bushmen' and that they were engaged in hunting.

35 See Bairu Tafla 1987, 354.

36 Rey 1927, 42.

dicinal purpose. One may therefore think that if the Dube had connection with slavery, their tradition could have accepted it just like it dose for eating of the hippo.³⁷ See how this riverine culture was viewed as an attribute of low social status below.

Writers however continued to use the name ‘Adone’ in specific reference to the Dube even after the name Dube began to appear in the sources. John S. Trimingham labelled the Šabeli and Dube as the northern groups of communities of black population known by the Darood Somali as ‘Adone’. Trimingham is also the first writer to use the name Dube.³⁸ Ulrich Braukämper was more explicit in specifying the physical, linguistic, and economic background of the Dube. He writes, ‘[t]he Adone, a Negroid Somali-speaking population on the banks of the Wabi Shaballe, are obviously the offspring of Bantu slaves who settled and expanded there since the last century’.³⁹ The late anthropologist, Ulrich Braukämper writes, ‘[t]he Adone, a negroid Somali-speaking group of peasants and fishermen, who are called Warra Dubba by the Oromo, have extended their settlements [...] in the provinces of Arsi and Bale in 1973 up to the upper course of the Wabi-Shabelle’.⁴⁰ Also, Ali G. Guirreh writes, ‘they [the ‘Adone’] are found along the [Wabi Šäbälle River] which [...] connects Ethiopia with Somalia’.⁴¹ The above extracts from historical pieces therefore narrate the connection of riverine societies of the Wabi Šäbälle valley in general and the Dube in particular with slavery. These literary narratives however need substantiation in light of the narratives, culture and traditions of social stratifications of the study area either to justify it or to discover the reason that led to them being thought of as slaves.

Slavery in Local Narratives

Social stratification was a key imprint left by slavery on the social fabric of societies of the Wabi Šäbälle valley.⁴² The most distinct strata were Islamic clerics of *šarīfīc* descent (from the Prophet’s family) and the *biliis* Somali pastoralists at the top and craft specialists and slaves at the bottom. There was (and still exists in some ways) the practice of marginalization against the Dube and some riverine cultivators that lay within a general categorization known as ‘Reer

37 Kefyalew Tessema 2020, 97.

38 Trimingham 1952, 6, 221.

39 See Braukämper 1977, 19. It should be noted that achieving ethnographic precision is challenging due to the overlapping use of blanket terms in the classification and application to different groups.

40 Braukämper 2004, 137.

41 Guirreh 2013, 76.

42 Bonacci and Meckelburg 2017, 5.

Adone' or 'Sanyii Adoonaa' meaning 'slave race'.⁴³ Hence in oral sources black skin and curly hair implies a person who descended from this 'race'.⁴⁴

The Hawiyya and Rahanweyn Somali had slave concubines and intermarried with slave communities, a pattern distinct from their ancestors who kept their identity through endogamous marriage and separating settlements from the pastoralists. In addition, the pastoralists intermarried with each other and with craft workers, Arabs, Indians and ex-slaves as long as the required bride wealth was provided. Informants exemplify this view listing several clans and lineage among the Rahanweyn and Hawiyya Somali who originated from slave ancestors but had synchronized Somali genealogies. Aside from which, *sheeged* (adoption, Som: *sheegato*) also helped them boost their social capital by absorbing vassel (not necessarily only enslavable) communities and expanding over a large area of land unlike the riverine cultivators.⁴⁵

The riverine lifestyle is another factor exposing the Dube to discrimination by their pastoral neighbours. But the Dube view their riverine tradition as ancestral heritage with no connection to their livelihood strategies and slavery. For a long time their forefathers practiced hunting and fishing along the riverbanks. The hunting culture of the Dube for instance is remembered for the practice of hunting the hippo and the use of its meat (flesh) for medicinal purposes as mentioned above. But pastoralists view this practice as a source of impurity and implement this distaste for that traditional practice as means to look down on Dube culture.⁴⁶

In the region's traditional social structure, differences in dialect played a significant role in how the Dube community was perceived in relation to slave descent. The Dube people had a distinct form of speech known as '*af-Dube*', which closely resembled the dialect spoken by riverine communities in southern Somalia, referred to as '*af-maymay*'.

The Dube developed skills in hoe (*miga* in *af-Dube*) cultivation on floodplains and in areas out of the river banks by using irrigation, which sometimes helped them produce crops in excess of their household needs. This surplus production in sorghum and vegetables facilitated economic interaction with their pastoralist neighbours. They would exchange their surplus crops for dairy products and live animals at the time. Even, the Degine, Gherri-Mero, Reer Barre, Girrira, and Šabeli peoples learned flood cultivation from the Dube. They also settled closer to the Dube and established marriage ties with them. Consequent-

43 For a non-African unfamiliar with how to make physical distinctions between two African societies, these features are not easily identifiable and are dependent on the beholder. It is also both subjective and relative.

44 Informants: Dube elders, Addis Abāba, July 2017.

45 Informants: Dube elders, Gasara, January 2018 and Dallo Manna, November 2017.

46 Kefyalew Tessema 2020, 97–98.

ly, all the riverine communities came to be generalized as slave descendants by the pastoralists. Due to their comparative numerical advantage in region, the majority of the pastoralists appear to have imposed the notion of lower social status akin to slavery on those cultivators.⁴⁷

Interestingly, a comparison was drawn between the social status of the Dube and that of Somali occupational minorities, such as the ‘Yibir’ (sorcerers), ‘Midgan’ (woodworkers, hunters), and ‘Tumal’ (blacksmiths). Despite these artisan groups holding a lower social position among the Somali, they spoke proper Somali, without any specific dialect associated with their trade.

In contrast, due to their unique form of speech, the Dube were perceived as non-Somali by pastoralist Somalis, further reinforcing their separation from mainstream Somali society.

In summary, differences in dialect contributed to the social stratification in the region, with the Dube being seen as outsiders due to their distinct speech, while other occupational minorities, despite their lower status, did not face the same categorization based on their language.⁴⁸ Though there had been a mutual interdependence between these artisans and pastoralist Somalis, there was no typical dialect associated with any of these artisans unlike the Dube. Thus, the Dube were perceived as non-Somali by pastoralists.⁴⁹

Consequently, the social rift between riverine cultivators and pastoralists, created by the cumulative effect of the above issues, had been exacerbated by unwillingness to marriage exchanges and by members of both groups paying blood money. On top of the differences in traditional practices related to marriage in both groups, lack of mutual respect and overt contempt by pastoralists against the cultivators hindered marriage exchanges between them. Informants stated that pastoralists discourage marriage ties with riverine communities that they perceived as slaves, such as the Dube, Reer Barre, Degine, and Gherri-Mero.⁵⁰ According to Somali informants, there is no clear difference among these riverine societies. Due to the absence of mutual recognition as equals, the pastoralist was unwilling to pay blood money known as *diyyo* (among the Somali) and *guma* (among the Oromo) for members of the Dube and other riverine cultivators killed by members of their communities. This often caused sporadic and violent conflicts in the region. The difference in physiognomic features, forms of speech and culturally valued livelihoods therefore led to stereotypical

47 Kefyalew Tessema 2020, 144; Informants: Dube elders, Addis Abāba, February 2017, July 2018.

48 Burton 1856, 33–34; Trimmingham 1952, 5, 221; Luling 1983, 47–49.

49 Kefyalew Tessema 2020, 144; Informants: Dube elders, Gindhir, May 2018 and Goba, January 2018.

50 Informants: Dube elders, Gindhi, May 2018 and Goba, January 2018.

views pitting the two neighbours against each other, despite persistent economic and political interactions.⁵¹

Similarly, there were other forms of customary and mutual economic interdependences between riverine cultivators and their pastoralist neighbours. One form of economic tie between the pastoralist Somali and riverine cultivators was the exchange of the products each cultivated. The riverine cultivators exchanged products such as vegetables, fruits and sorghum for the pastoralists dairy products and livestock. Furthermore, the farmers shared their expertise in flood cultivation and irrigation to pastoralist Somali lineages such as the Kerenle, Gelemsis and Degodi, who, to cope with drought, eventually began to practice farming.⁵² The former provided the pastoralists with safe access points (free from crocodiles) on major rivers to water their stock and provided a place for animals' recovery. However they did not stay long on the riverside due to the many tropical flies attacking the livestock. Pastoralists also needed the riverine communities' assistance in transporting animals across the river for which they paid cash or gave cattle and dairy products. Such economic interdependence was of mutual benefit for both neighbouring societies.⁵³

In Lieu of a Conclusion: Unequal Socio-Economic Interaction as Key to Relating the Dube to Slave Status

Although slavery was an old institution in Ethiopia, our knowledge of the immigration of peoples of slave descent from slave trading coastal areas of Indian Ocean to its south-eastern periphery is very limited. This is partly because the riverine areas of the Bale lowlands are among the most under-researched areas of Ethiopia whose inhabitants are generally known as Cushitic speaking pastoralists. Hence, its diversity has been overlooked and the existence of people of Bantu descent and riverine cultivators in this part of Ethiopia is as yet only an emerging research theme. The firm institutionalization of slavery in the region therefore can be understood by its vividness in the social memory and marginalization created based on presumed descent from slaves. Consequently, the Dube's and other riverine societies of the regions' physiognomic attributes were associated with descent from slaves jeopardizing their security and their legal right to equality.

Despite rejecting the connection with slavery in the Dube narratives, both written sources and oral data collected from the region converge on the origin of the Dube from an area once settled by slave communities. The most important issue in the narrative relating the Dube to slave status is their label under the

51 Informants: Dube elders, Addis Abäba, January 2018; Barnes 2000, 23.

52 Kefyalew Tessema 2020.

53 Informants: Dube elders, Gindhir, May 2018, Goba, January 2018 and Addis Abäba, December 2018.

derogative appellation ‘*adone*’ meaning slave. The available sources unanimously designated the people known by this name with slave status. There were also other societies of the region categorized with such lowly status by the majority pastoralists due to ‘differences that matter’. Moreover, the relative precarious position of the Dube in their socio-economic and political history was regarded as clear justification for the alleged status.

The missing link to the imposition of slave status on the Dube however was their unequal socio-economic interaction with the pastoralists. The Somali pastoralists forced many riverine cultivators to provide service using collective security and struggle against government’s repression as the pretext.⁵⁴ In terms of collective security, for instance, the various pastoralist Somali clans had cooperative alliances in times of security threats. This alliance also involved riverine communities living among clans in the state of traditional warfare. In this warfare, the riverine societies were intimidated to provide labour service, grains, produce traditional weapons and give information for pastoralist Somalis such as the Degodi, Gelemsis, Kerenle, Hawiyya, and Rahanweyn in return for protection of their safety against the raids of the Ogadeni Somalis such as Reer Amaden, Reer Awlihan and Adenker. The labour involved in working on farmlands was a typical relation between the Dube and Somali pastoralists, who wanted to keep the cultivators as their dependents and considered it to be their privilege. They also reckoned on old *sheegadt* (adoption) ties or patronage relations in claiming the right to demand those services. The Dube cultivators for their part considered such interaction to be their survival strategy in dealing with their warlike majority pastoralists. During the struggle against the state, the pastoralists compelled the riverine cultivators to take part in all aspects of resistance. These unequal relations therefore were a matter of domination that has continued from that period in spite of changes in the actual forms of domination.⁵⁵

The 1975 Rural Land Proclamation of Ethiopia which abolished all forms of feudal socio-economic relations lacked any proper implementation and led to the Dube’s continued servitude to the pastoralist Somali elites.⁵⁶ One form of continued servitude was the donating of gifts in kind and service to some prominent religious figures to access religious services, mosques and Quranic schools. The Dubes spiritual needs were challenged due to a popular allegation that the Dube

54 See correspondence in Archives of the Former Bale Province Administration Office የቀድሞ ባሌ ክፍለ ሀገር የአስተዳደር ፅ/ቤት ሰነዶች (*Yäqädmō bale kəflä hagär astädadär dā/bet sänädoč*), Folder No. 3/003. የባሌ ክ/ሀ የሶማሌ ስብከትና ወንበዴዎችን የማስገባት (*Yäbale K/H yäsomale səbkätænna wānbādewoččən yāmasgābat*, ‘Bale Province rebel activities’) for security alliance between riverine cultivators and pastoralists against the state.

55 Kefyalew Tessema 2020, 140–142; see Barnes 2000 in the map between pages 21 and 22 for distribution cultivators.

56 Kefyalew Tessema 2020, 315.

feed on aquatic animals, a practice forbidden by Islamic law. As a result, it was said that Dube settlements paid a penalty in servitudes to clerics and chiefs to obtain permission to build mosques and gain access to the *imāms* serving there. The Dube had to approach the pastoralists' *imāms* to access service in mosques in Dube villages. These clerics therefore sustained 'over-lordship' in spiritual matters of the Dube. The fact that these feudal servitudes were not effectively abolished persisted in maintaining the Dube's serfdom status and continued the unequal interaction between the Dube and their neighbours, who bolstered their customary supremacy in the region with raids and violence.⁵⁷

The region's lack of any proper abolishment of socio-economic relations pertaining to slavery formed the reasoning behind the pervasiveness of divergent slave status narratives. Oral narratives are embedded with memories of societies enslaved by others. During the pre-1974 feudal regime in Ethiopia, there were forms of servitudes such as free labour service in return for security imposed by majority pastoralists on the minority riverine communities. Reforms following the 1974 and 1991 revolutions brought significant changes on socio-economic relations among the diverse societies of Ethiopia, however, they were not seriously implemented on its south-eastern borderlands. This is evidenced by the terminologies used to designate communities as slaves, which though rarely in use impact far more in group level interactions than with interpersonal relations. Consequently, old forms of slave–master relations were replaced by new and salient forms subservient to clan and political elites in the periphery. Slavery therefore left a significant imprint on the socio-economy and social fabric of Wabi Šäbälle valley societies as elsewhere in the Horn of Africa.

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The History of Slave Raids and the Politicization of Memory: Gumuz–Agāw Relations, c.1991 to 2019

DESALEGN AMSALU

Summary

The Agāw military chiefs worked as intermediaries in the political expeditions of the highland Ethiopian kingdom against the Gumuz. The Amhara military chiefs made their ultimate advance on the Gumuz region in 1898 with the help of Agāw military chiefs. Following this, the Agāw courts were established at the foothills of the Bälāya mountain and played an important role in administering the region. They collected taxes and hunted elephants from the Gumuz region for the central government. The role of the Agāw military chiefs is also remembered for their participation in slave raids since the early twentieth century. Through the lens of the politics of memory, this paper discusses how the memory of the slave raids is appropriated to redefine the relationship between the Gumuz and other communities since 1991, with a specific focus on Agāw and Gumuz relations. The politicization of memory in the interethnic relationship between the two groups is illustrated through case studies on how discourses of slave raids have influenced everyday interactions, land disputes, the 2005 general political election, and conflicts and displacements following political reforms in Ethiopia since 2018. The paper juxtaposes the often-antagonistic commemoration of the past and the burden of the past in the present-day interethnic relations.

Introduction

The Gumuz, like other communities in western Ethiopia, were exposed to slavery either by the highland Ethiopian rulers or by the Sudanese.¹ Both of these neighbours conducted slave raids for their use and sale to the Arab world.² The social memory of such slave raids plays an active role to this day in terms of the animosity between the Gumuz and the rest of the communities in Mātākkāl. Ordinary people as well as politicians often resort to past events of slave-raiding stating, ‘you tortured and enslaved the Gumuz in the past, but now it is our [Gumuz’s] turn’.³ Since 1991 when ethnic relations were redefined based on ethnic federalism, slave raid memory has increasingly appeared on the surface, as politicians and ordinary people, informed by the ethnic politics, use it as a tool to manipulate opinion, with ensuing divisions and animosities.

I use the *politics of memory* approach to interpret the work of the slave-raiding memory since 1991, since politics, instead of culture, primarily organizes and mediates the memory. The term ‘politics of memory’ is used to refer to

1 Meckelburg 2015; Abdussamad H. Ahmad 1999.

2 González-Ruibal and Fernández Martínez 2007; Abdussamad H. Ahmad 1999; Markakis 2011.

3 Dagnachew Ayenew 2018, 7.

the political appropriation of collective memory in the present. Such appropriation may range from the 'invention of tradition', i.e. inventing memories that are not necessarily true, to the use of historical 'realities' to the present political needs.⁴ The memory being invoked may fall at any place in the continuum between authenticity and invention. But a common approach in conceiving the politics of memory is that memory is organized and used in the political context. The past is remembered, recorded, or discarded for and through political means.⁵ Memory is dynamic and can be created and recreated.⁶ Existing memories can be modified, repressed, or can generate counter-memories within a given political context.⁷

In this paper, I analyse 'events' since 1991 to illustrate the role of the social memory of slave raiding in the interethnic relationship between Agäw and Gumuz. I use social memory as a concept which refers to a community's understanding of their past, regardless of its historical accuracy. The grievance of the Gumuz is commonly expressed against all 'non-indigenous' ethnic groups (as the term will be explained below). Sentiments are particularly strong against the Amhara, as several studies have shown.⁸ Sometimes, the Gumuz direct their grievances against Agäw and Amhara alike, while they differ in other cases, depending on the interethnic alliance created by a conflict situation.⁹ I will also refer to the Gumuz memory concerning both Amhara and Agäw, but the paper centres the latter. As each side, the Gumuz and the Agäw, present their memories and interpretation about slave raiding in the past, I will discuss those competing memories. I focus here on slave raids, not on the slave trade as such, as I discuss those who were involved in capturing slaves from the villages and the use of slaves at private households.

Scholars conceptualize memory into 'formats', 'sites' or 'institutions'¹⁰ for a convenience of analysis. Memory is not just preserved in one form but is often represented and communicated through multiple mediums and practices that reflect the cultural and historical contexts of different communities. Depending on the type of society or group, memories can be found in oral narratives, commemorative rituals, books, monuments, and museums, generally through a combination of various methods such as 'discursive, visual and spatial elements'.¹¹ I use 'events' here to refer to occasions where social memory about slave-raiding has been expressed between the two communities under study. I will discuss the

4 Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983.

5 Misztal 2003; Nasrallah 2005.

6 Misztal 2003.

7 Tello 2019.

8 See for example Wolde-Selassie Abbute 2004; Berihun Mebrate 1996; Tsega Endalew 2006.

9 Gebre Yntiso 2003.

10 Kansteiner 2002; Nora 1989.

11 Kansteiner 2002, 190.

nature of everyday relations, their contestation over land rights, the local context of the results of the 2005 general election, and conflict and displacement following Ethiopia's alleged political reform in April 2018 as 'events' where the social memory about slavery has surfaced. I use oral data in addition to written sources regarding these events. An important distinction here can be made about oral traditions and oral data. The former refers to formally preserved, not always as narratives, but in some fixed forms such as proverbs representing a collective people. Oral data are individual memories that people have seen, experienced or heard.¹² This study uses oral data. I have not come across oral traditions or 'institutions' during my investigation in the field, but Berihun mentions that slave raids are recounted in public rituals.¹³

The first part of what follows contextualizes historical antecedents of slavery and post-1991 ethnic politics that created favourable condition for the use of narratives about past events. Then, I present 'events' that are recounted in social memory, as mentioned above, which include the everyday life of the neighbourhoods populated by both Agäw and Gumuz, their contestation over land rights or land use, the local context of the results of the 2005 general election, and conflict and displacements following Ethiopia's alleged political reform since April 2018.

I have undertaken research among the Gumuz and Agäw since 2009. However, two visits in the field that focused on doing interviews with the local Agäw and Gumuz people on the role of slave raid in their interethnic relations were carried out in April and May 2018 and in August and September 2019 in contiguous and mixed settlements of Agäw and Gumuz in Mätäkkäl Zone. During these periods, I conducted formal and informal interviews with several Agäw and Gumuz community members and local government personnel in Mätäkkäl and Asosa. I also conducted an intensive desk review on the historical aspects and the current social and political trends affecting relationship between the two communities.

Historical Antecedents and Current Trends

While the exact ethnogenesis of the Agäw and Gumuz is obscure, contacts between the two groups and predecessors, go back to the Aksumite period, to the second half of the third century.¹⁴ The then kings of Aksum assigned Agäw chiefs to collect tribute and to secure gold trade routes. Sources remain silent until the fifteenth century but historical trajectories in the region of north-west Ethiopia suggest a continuity of contacts.

12 Klein 1989.

13 Berihun Mebrate 2004, 178.

14 Taddesse Tamrat 1972, 28.

The first known direct reference to the Gumuz of Mätäkkäl is found in the chronicles of King Yəshaq (1413–1430).¹⁵ Yəshaq undertook campaigns in all directions of the country, including today's Mätäkkäl. His chronicles show that cotton and goats were extracted from the Gumuz area. When the capital city of the highland kingdom shifted to Gondär, Mätäkkäl became easily accessible so that many Gondärine kings (1632–1769) made successive campaigns against it. The chronicle of Emperor Šärsä Dəngəl (1563–1596) tells of the war on the Gumuz and reports that after 'taking lots of cattle and black slaves, the king sent out his troops to pillage grain and burn houses'.¹⁶ The offensive continued during Susənyos (1607–1632), Fasilädäs (1632–1667), and Yoħannəs I (1667–1683). The final breakthrough was made during Iyasu (1683–1706) as he made several yearly raids across the region. By the 1770s, the Gumuz had been integrated into the highland Christian kingdom. Yet, an expedition that was made later by King Täklä Haymanot of Goğgam (1881–1901) in 1898 consolidated central control over the Gumuz territories on the Ethio-Sudanese border.¹⁷

The Agäw south and south-west of Lake Ṭana had already been incorporated in the Christian kingdom before the Gumuz. Medieval Gondärine kings had made yearly raids to Agäw inhabited areas, too.¹⁸ Once they subdued the Agäw, the Gondärine kings used Agäw military chiefs to mount expeditions engaging in trade, taxation, hunting, and slave raids in the Gumuz country.¹⁹ Agäw courts were established at the foothills of the Bäläya mountain after King Täklä Haymanot controlled the area in 1898. *Fitawrari* Zälläqä Liqu became the governor of Bäläya and Tumuha which is found in today's Mätäkkäl Zone.²⁰

Once subdued, the Gumuz lands between the Bäläs River and Agäw Mədər (meaning Agäw country) became a 'reservoir of slaves'.²¹ The Gumuz villages were divided among the Agäw military chiefs and each local chief controlled a specific village and territory, and owned and raided slaves within that space. It was common to hear people saying 'these are slaves of so and so'²² to refer to the fact that a chief could not raid or own slaves from villages other than the ones they were attributed. The practice of slave raiding among the Gumuz con-

15 Taddesse Tamrat 1988b. The Gumuz were usually subsumed with other peoples of the borderlands as *šanqəlla*.

16 Nyssen 2021, 5.

17 Abdussamad H. Ahmad 1995, 54.

18 Bruce 1805.

19 Taddesse Tamrat 1988a; Taddesse Tamrat 1988b; Bruce 1805; Abdussamad H. Ahmad 1995, 56, 57.

20 Abdussamad H. Ahmad 1995, 62.

21 Abdussamad H. Ahmad 1999, xx.

22 Wondim Tiruneh 2018, 29.

tinued informally until 1974 despite Emperor Ḥaylā Šəllase (r.1930–1974) having officially outlawed slavery in 1942.²³

Historically, the slave raiding and government attempts to enforce taxation triggered conflicts between the highland Ethiopians and the Gumuz community members, or between the Gumuz and the state military forces.²⁴ In 1941, after Ethiopia's liberation from the Italian occupation, the Gumuz protested the informal continuation of slave raiding, despite official law banning slavery, as well as against the taxation system of the time which was considered abusive. Illicit firearm trafficking was rampant, and created favourable conditions for conflicts, seeing the Gumuz launch retaliatory attacks against the Agäw and destroying their property.²⁵ In 1944, a conflict broke out in Mandura, Dəbaṭi, and Zīgām as the Gumuz refused to pay tax, killed the Agäw tax collectors, harassing them on market days, and setting their houses and crops on fire.²⁶ In 1960, serious conflict occurred in the same place, in Mätäkkäl. A Gumuz man known as Lamčä, holding a self-proclaimed military rank of *colonel*, emerged as a leader of an organized revolt. The event was named Lamčä rebellion (locally known as *yälamčä amäš*, *lamčaw améš*, or *lamčä wuma* in Amharic, Awnji,²⁷ and Gumuz languages respectively). This rebellion, aimed at ending exploitive tax collection, created a strong alliance among the Gumuz in and beyond Mätäkkäl, including those in Didessa valley on the side of the current Oromia region.²⁸ The end of the imperial regime in 1974 generally ended slave raiding *de facto* among the Gumuz.²⁹ Besides, the *Därg* regime that succeeded the Imperial regime elevated local Gumuz personalities to run the local political office. At the same time, the *Därg* undertook a large-scale resettlement of people from the drought affected Wällo areas of Amhara to the Gumuz country in Mätäkkäl. In the mid-1980s, the regime resettled about 82,000 Amhara from the Wällo region (hence the Gumuz hosts call them 'Wällo') to the Gumuz country.³⁰ This event improved the relationship of Gumuz with Agäw while their relationship with the new communities in the resettlement areas became problematic. The Gumuz resisted the resettlement and consequently, a series of conflicts with the

23 Imperial Ethiopian Government 1942; Wolde-Selassie Abbute 2002.

24 Alemayehu Erkyihun 2012, 91–92.

25 Bazezew Gelaw 1990, 20; Jira Mekura 2008, 31.

26 Bazezew Gelaw 1990, 20.

27 Awnji is the language of the local Agäw people discussed in this article. The same people are also called Awi. Since the ethnic federalism that came into effect in 1991, their official name is Awi and they are designated a zonal administration called Awi Nationality Administration Zone under Amhara region. However, the literature before 1991 and to this day the Gumuz people alike refer them to as Agäw.

28 Alemayehu Erkyihun 2015.

29 Wolde-Selassie Abbute 2002.

30 Gebre Yntiso 2003, 50.

settlers emerged, thus developing enmity.³¹ This time, the Agäw played a role in the mediation of the conflicts between the Gumuz and 'Wällo', and informants from both the Gumuz and Agäw underlined this alliance. This seemed to have gained a reputation for the Agäw and a favourable attitude from the Gumuz, but lasted only until the introduction of ethnic federalism.

In 1991, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) deposed the *Därg* regime and structured its government based on ethnic federalism, which reversed the political power relationship between the Gumuz and the rest of the communities. According to Article 2 of the Amharic version of the 2002 Revised Constitution of the Beni Šangul-Gumuz region (BGR), only Gumuz, Berta, Šinaša, Mao, and Komo are '*baläbetoc*' of the region, which is translated as 'indigenous' in the English version of the same constitution.³² By contrast, other ethnic groups of significant numbers³³ residing in the region, including Agäw and Amhara, in spite of their significant size in population, are not defined as 'indigenous'. This distinction between indigenous and non-indigenous has important socio-economic and political ramifications leading the 'non-indigenous' communities to express discontent. The outcome being that both the Gumuz and the Agäw consider themselves victims: the Gumuz emphasizing their historical victimhood by invoking memories of enslavement by 'non-indigenous' communities, while the Agäw emphasize their contemporary victimhood through the exclusionary ethnic federalism system. These feelings of victimhood, whether originating in the past or present, however, do need to be interpreted within the political context in the country and in Mätäkkäl and are nuanced as individuals do not tell uniformly of those sources of victimhood. Many local interlocutors speaking about the history of enslavement repeat, for example, talk of the distinction between, on the one hand, the ordinary people of Agäw or Gumuz, and on the other, the distinction between Agäw military chiefs (in the past) and Gumuz political cadres today. According to the view of Agäw informants, blaming the ordinary Agäw people today for the historical experience of slave raids is unfair. Former Agäw or Amhara military chiefs were to blame. In fact, it was the chiefs who participated in the slave raid and not only the Agäw chiefs. The slave raid was enabled by a chain of actors ranging from the Amhara military chiefs at the top to the Agäw in the middle and the Gumuz headmen at the level of the villages. The Gumuz participated in capturing slaves in the villages and handing them to the Agäw chiefs who in turn handed them to the chiefs of the central government. The Gumuz knew the roads to the villages used to raid slaves very well. They captured men and women under cover of

31 Dessalegn Rahmato 1988; Gebre Yntiso 2003; Gebre Yntiso 2004; Tsega Endalew 2006; Wolde-Selassie Abbute 2004.

32 *Revised Constitution* 2002.

33 See Central Statistics Agency 2007, the country's latest census.

night and carried them to a local transit point. There, the Agāw received the slaves from the Gumuz and in turn carried them to Amhara traders in the local market centres, i.e. Dangāla, Qəlaḡ, and ʿInḡəbara. Thus, the slave trade had multiple actors. According to informants, the Agāw raiders' participation deserves no more attention than the participation of local Gumuz actors.

According to my Agāw informant, interviewed in 2014, who passed away in 2016, ordinary Agāw people protected the Gumuz from the slave raids. There were two ways the Gumuz used to take refuge from the slave raiders. To escape capture, the Gumuz family and individuals were hosted by different Gumuz clans despite the enmity. Moreover, the Agāw friends used to hide Gumuz children to prevent them from being captured. Upon hearing this the slave raiders would go to Agāw households looking for the fugitives. But the Agāw dug holes the size and length of the fugitives and placed wooden planks over them. They formed a coop over the planks where they penned their goats and sheep. When the raiders came, they searched the entire home for the fugitives. They checked all corners and went back without finding those hiding in the coop hole. They also hid the children in the granary, in the bed floor and other such secret places. The Gumuz informants also confirm that driven by fear of enslavement, Gumuz families brought their children to the Agāw households.

Some existing studies, albeit briefly, support the above report. Berihun exposes that since there was enmity among different Gumuz clans, the local Gumuz elites raided slaves from enemy clans, which naturally met with retaliation.

Although slave raiding and slaving were mainly conducted by people who were non-Gumuz in origin, there were individuals from the Gumuz who collaborated in facilitating the raiding. Individuals [*bala-bats* and administrators] like Mārša, Balča, Jinawa, and Mewa [in Mandura area] are remembered for their collaboration in raiding and enslaving their own people.³⁴

Literature also provides information on the experience of other communities in the Beni Šangul-Gumuz region where at various times, local power holders and intermediaries with the governments raided members of their own ethnic group: 'All the Nilo-Saharan groups suffered from slave raids until the 1940s. However, some Berthas and a few Gumuz profited from the situation enslaving both other Nilo-Saharans and their own kinsfolk'.³⁵

In fact, Šayḥ Ḥamdān Abūšok of Gubba, Šayḥ Ḥ^waḡalī al-Ḥasan of Asosa, the ones mentioned above in the quote, in Mātākkāl, conducted slave raids among their kin and collaborated with different state authorities to strengthen their

34 Berihun Mebrate 2004, 182–183.

35 González-Ruibal and Fernández Martínez 2007, 9.

power. The remains of their palaces (Hamdān Abūšok and H^wağālī's) are among a few historical monuments visible in Beni Šangul today.³⁶

Slave Raid Memory in Everyday Interactions since 1991

Many informants witnessed that since 1991 when ethnic federalism was introduced as a new political order, slave raid memory often surfaced in the local politics. The Gumuz and Agāw people live largely in mixed neighbourhoods in Mätäkkäl. While Agāw and other non-Gumuz groups are dominant in towns, the former also share proximity with the Gumuz in rural villages. In the rural or urban neighbourhoods, members of both communities interact in several ways, such as in markets, local bars, and schools. During their everyday interactions, several informants confirmed that the past seeps through the interaction between the two groups and triggers events of aggression. Sarah Vaughan also noted that oftentimes, the sense of abuse overrides the Gumuz emotion whenever they fall into even minor individual quarrels.³⁷ Everyday life is important in memory studies since therein are 'pieces of the past'.³⁸

Many Agāw informants stressed that these days, one's discourses, even between friends, should be measured. There should be no use of derogatory words relating to slave raids even for fun. According to Gumuz informants, it is less common now to hear stereotypes against them from non-Gumuz communities who are often identified as 'brown-skinned' or *qäy*, as they refer to Agāw and Amhara in Amharic. During the *Därg* time and before, there were jokes and derogatory words that stereotyped the Gumuz. A common word was '*barya*' or '*šanqälla*'. *Šanqälla* is a derogatory exonym for the Gumuz and other darker-skinned people of Ethiopia denoting darker skin-complexion or blackness and connecting and indicating a state of being uncivilized. '*Barya*' in Amharic literally means 'slave' in usage since the early twentieth century also indicates 'dark' skin colour. Both meanings are pejorative. An Agāw informant confirmed that even if it is not possible to say that such words were acceptable in the past, they were not as sensitive and offensive as they are today. These terms are now sensitive, and they can easily result in conflict. According to the informant, if one were to say these words today even in indirect reference, both parties would fly into conflict.

Aräqi, a local liquor common among Amhara and Agāw, is spreading among the Gumuz and being consumed increasingly. It is available in local markets and tea houses, both in Agāw and Gumuz settlement areas. According to both Agāw and Gumuz informants, drinking *aräqi*, spread to the Gumuz region along with

36 Donham 2002; Garretson 1980; González-Ruibal 2011; Meckelburg 2021.

37 Vaughan 2007, 28.

38 Pickering and Keighley 2015, 180.

the settlement of Agäw and Amhara. Many Gumuz households today carry their crops to the market, sell them and then spend a considerable amount of money drinking *aräqi*. Particularly during the harvest season, family members carry their crops, sell them, and buy *aräqi*. It is also common for Agäw and Gumuz friends to share the fun of drinking together. However, such friendships may often be volatile as the perception of past stereotypes may turn conversations into arguments while drinking. An Agäw informant stated,

Sometimes, we spend time talking and sharing fun and food in the villages or *aräqi* in towns. Everything goes fine and each of us goes to our homes. After days, let me say, one or more of them would come to my home and say it was wrong to have fun together last time. They would say this perhaps because they were advised by someone else politically charged. They sometimes ask, ‘Why did you enslave us in the old days?’ We would say, ‘No, we don’t know about that story. We are here with you and if our forefathers had done it, it was a mistake. But we are here peaceful.’ When they are convinced, they become happy on the spot and even cheer and regret for having asked us such a question. But, next time, they may change their mind and ask us again the same question. I think it depends on what they are told by politicians.³⁹

In my research area in Mätäkkäl, the Gumuz and Agäw live in shared neighbourhoods and have generally developed good neighbourly relations leading to adaption and social and cultural changes. Sharing foods and drinks has become an essential aspect of togetherness. Also, previous food taboos by the Gumuz (e.g. milk and eggs) have changed. However, the politicization of memory jeopardizes these peaceful relations.⁴⁰ An elderly Gumuz informant stated,

Every single news in Addis Abäba or Asosa may potentially disturb our relations as good neighbours. Some rumours would just spread, ‘Amhara is coming [also including the Agäw]; they are bringing an old administration when you were enslaved; you will no longer exercise self-rule; they are going to take away Mätäkkäl from you...’ Rumours spread with a lot of things. Then we start to become suspicious of each other. Then, we may fight. After some time, we hear also government officials saying the rumours are false and it is spread by anti-peace and anti-development forces. Then, our relationship seems to get normal.⁴¹

39 Interview, 21 August 2019, Agäw informant, Mandura.

40 The Gumuz do not traditionally consume milk and eggs.

41 Interview, 9 September 2019, Gumuz informant, Gəlgäl Bäläs.

Slave Raid Memory in the Question of Land

The Gumuz of Mätäkkäl believe that they have lost their land to state sponsored resettlers, self-initiated voluntary migrants and investors. The Gumuz lost a significant part of their land due to state sponsored resettlement of the drought-affected Amhara from Wällo during the mid-1980s. As mentioned above, about 82,000 Amhara from the Wällo region were resettled to Mätäkkäl leading to dislocation of the Gumuz from their land and livelihoods.⁴² Aside from which, neighbouring Agäw and Amhara households are increasingly spreading onto Gumuz land. The informal settlers have acquired land in different ways, the common mechanism being the institution *məḡəm*.⁴³ Moreover, since 1991, they have also lost their land due to investments.⁴⁴

Following the ethnic federalism that came into effect *de facto* in 1991 and *de jure* with the 1995 Constitution, one of the contestations by the Gumuz against the Agäw, as is to all ‘brown-skinned’ communities, was it not being right to allow Agäw and other ‘non-indigenous’ communities to possess land by taking advantage of the *məḡəm* relationship. The Gumuz thus sometimes reclaim lands they might have bequeathed to their Agäw friends a long time ago. They think they were manipulated by Amhara and Agäw at the expense of social relations. Agäw informants stated that when the Gumuz drink, they may go to the homes of Agäw neighbours and shout at them in front of their doors. They may come with arms or spears. The Gumuz would ask Agäws to abandon their land even though the former may have been ploughing it for decades. An Agäw shared his experience,

I had a plot of land here [Mätäkkäl] and the land was first possessed by my grandfather during Ḥaylä Şəllase’s regime. My grandfather passed it to my father and then my father passed the land to me. In 2006, three Gumuz men came to my house and talked to me that the land originally belonged to them. They asserted that their land was taken when the Agäw were powerful. They said I need to return their land now. Now, it is the time for ‘*bəherbəheräsäboč*’ [to mean nations and nationalities which are ‘indigenous’ to the region according to BGR constitution]

42 Gebre Yntiso 2003, 50.

43 *Məḡəm* creates mutual support and relationships between the Gumuz and other non-Gumuz communities. The base is that an ‘outsider’ presents a gift for the Gumuz, e.g. cloth, salt, and other items not found in the Gumuz culture or market, to the Gumuz *məḡəm* counterpart. In their turn, the Gumuz *məḡəm* would usually give land to their ‘outsider’ *məḡəm*. However, this does not mean that the *məḡəm* relationship was just built on economic interests because, in times of war and insecurity, the Agäw and their Gumuz *məḡəms* had to protect each other.

44 Tsegaye Moreda 2018.

and they can no longer be fooled.⁴⁵ They also said, ‘You have ruled us in the past’ and ‘Your forefathers caught and sold us in slavery.’ It is not only we should give them the land back. According to them, we [Agäw] have Awi Zone in Amhara region which is attributed to us. So, we and other ‘non-indigenous’ people should go each to our designated administrative areas. They seek a serious redress for the wrong they believe we have done to them in the past.⁴⁶

References to slavery are found in discourses criticizing the current acquisition of land by investors. Taking land for the purpose of agricultural investment was common during the EPRDF’s regime. The land acquisition was criticized for being an authoritarian villagization, deportations and expropriations in the name of investment;⁴⁷ it has gradually become a point of contention where the Gumuz authorities see a continuity in the dispossession of land, this time in the name of investment. Previous studies show that Beni Šangul-Gumuz region has been one of the corridors of ‘land grabbing’ during the EPRDF’s regime.⁴⁸ Slavery surfaces in Gumuz discourses related to land dispossession:

How come a person who is born from us lets its ancestral marks [land] be destroyed by outsiders, or worse, by those people who enslaved our fathers and us for generations? We thought a new day has come for us in which our voices will be heard when our children assumed government positions and kids started going to school. But these local officials of ours did not stand on our side when our lands were grabbed. They deceived us instead. We don’t trust them anymore, I swear! Had it not been for our fierce resistance, we would have disappeared from this area long ago.⁴⁹

Here, the investors are considered part of the history and responsible for the continuation of slavery in the Gumuz. As indicated earlier, slave raiding is not attributed to the Agäw alone. Since the 1990s, the Ethiopian government’s elites used ethnic federalism as a systematic way of freeing Amhara or Oromo-occupied lands in Beni Šangul-Gumuz and Gambella for the benefit of investors.

45 The English version of the 1995 Constitution of Ethiopia under Article 39 (5) uses ‘nations, nationalities, and peoples’ to refer to ethnic groups of Ethiopia, but with no definition in the constitution or anywhere else about what of each of these three words are. The Amharic version of the constitution uses ‘*bāheročč bāheräsāboččanna hazbočč*’. Since then, the term ‘*bāherbāheräsābočč*’ is derived from these terms and has become a buzzword.

46 Interview, 12 April 2018, Agäw informant Zigām.

47 Labzaé 2015, 4.

48 Tsegaye Moreda 2018.

49 Demissie Mulugeta 2013.

Sources suggest that the government provoked communities of different ethnic identities against each other to cause conflict, resulting in them abandoning their land.⁵⁰ Many scholars have written that there was frequent conflict over land use arrangements between the Gumuz and other community members; however, previously, the conflict handling mechanisms were relatively effective and the parties in conflict were mediated by local elders.⁵¹ Yet, conflicts that involved state actors become too complicated to handle by the parties directly involved in the dispute.

The 2005 General Election

Ethiopia held general elections on 15 May 2005, for seats in the national House of Peoples' Representatives and in four regional government councils. It was the first competitive election in Ethiopia⁵² and succeeded in attracting about 90 per cent of the registered voters to the polls.⁵³ However, protests began on 1 November 2005, against the results of the election and erupted in many parts of the country. The protests were supposedly led by the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD), the largest opposition political party during the election. The protests have prompted more than 60,000 arrests and beatings of protesters.⁵⁴

According to my discussion with Agäw informants in Mätäkkäl Zone, stories about the historical occurrences of slave raiding were revived to make the Gumuz youth become emotional and rise against the CUD which was believed to be a party with many Amhara and Agäw supporters. Rumours circulated that the CUD was organizing protests to take power, and that it was against the rights of 'nations, nationalities and peoples' unlike the EPRDF. The youth were told that, if CUD would become a government, it would restore the Amhara/Agäw hegemony, abolish federalism and the Gumuz would be enslaved again. An Agäw informant in Mätäkkäl remembered

Following protests of the 2005 general election results, there was much news that the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD) won the election. I was also a living witness that I and all friends I know didn't vote for EPRDF. The EPRDF cadres in Mätäkkäl chased many CUD supporters. One day, they caught me, beat me, and dragged me on the ground. They were local Gumuz militia. They said, 'You are going to bring back the old regime to oppress and enslave us again.' I begged

50 Labzaé 2015.

51 Berihun Mebrate 2004; Desalegn Amsalu 2016; Gebre Yntiso 2003; Tsega Endalew 2006; Wolde-Selassie Abbute 2004.

52 Carter Center 2009, 3.

53 European Union Election Observer Mission 2005.

54 Amnesty International 2005.

but no one heard me. When they are told about the past by their local cadres, even the ordinary Gumuz turn more hostile and more suspicious.⁵⁵

In this national election, the spectre of past enslavement was used as a metaphor for the political oppression of today. It appeared as a rhetoric implemented by the EPRDF politicians who were threatened by the popular support CUD gained at the time in different parts of the country. This political process witnessed the political use of slave raid memory by the local youth who did not learn much about the actual history of slavery but were emotionally instrumentalized for political mobilization.

The 2018 Political Reform and Conflict

From 2015 to 2018, the Ethiopian youth staged a series of protests against the EPRDF's regime due to unemployment, inequality, corruption, and human rights abuse, particularly following the 2005 general election.⁵⁶ The protests led to political reform in April 2018 when Abiy Ahmed became a new prime minister. However, interethnic conflicts erupted in many parts of the country, such as Somali, Oromia, and Beni Šangul-Gumuz, and people were displaced, thus disrupting the proposed reform. There were nearly 2.9 million new internally displaced persons (IDPs) in 2018, mostly after April 2018, due to conflict and violence. The figure was the biggest global record for the year⁵⁷ and very high compared to the 725,000 new displacements the country had witnessed in the previous year for the same reasons of interethnic conflict and violence.⁵⁸ The problem also extended into 2019, when mid-year figures showed that there were 522,000 new conflict and violence induced displacements, the third-highest figure globally.⁵⁹

Ethnic groups in Mätäkkäl were among those affected by a series of conflicts and displacement following the 2018 political reform. Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED) has recorded 115 conflicts events in Mätäkkäl from 13 September 2018 to 22 October 2022⁶⁰ and 1,052 fatalities have occurred between 1 April 2018 and 1 April 2021.⁶¹ These conflicts often arose due to 'minor' triggering but politically motivated factors. For example, on 25 April 2019, a conflict erupted over the Ethiopian Easter weekend in Dangur *wäräda* of

55 Interview, 10 September 2019, Agäw informant, Mandura.

56 McCracken 2004; Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre 2009.

57 Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre 2019, 6.

58 Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre 2018.

59 Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre 2019.

60 ACLED data in excel was filtered for Mätäkkäl, and the entire data can be found at <https://epo.acleddata.com/data/>, accessed on 20 February 2025.

61 <https://epo.acleddata.com/metekel-conflict/>, accessed on 20 February 2025.

Mätäkkäl Zone of BGR, a place dominantly inhabited by the Agäw. My informants confirmed that the conflict began with private altercations between a non-Gumuz bus driver and a Gumuz passenger.⁶²

In these conflicts, the past, including memories of slave raids, operated covertly or overtly. Informants argued that slave raids were openly mentioned by the local political cadres and the youth. Even after purported conflict resolutions that were supposed to have ended hostilities, the youth would come to homes of the Agäw or Amhara or on the street and say, 'You have enslaved us and now you want to enslave us again'.⁶³ According to my interviews with local politicians in Asosa, since 2018 the conflicts have been induced by political actors who had lost their grip on power due to the April 2018 reform in Ethiopia. Discussions with informants, government and non-governmental actors in relation to the prevention of conflict and resettlement of IDPs suggested that ousted political elites fed bad images about Agäw and Amhara to the Gumuz youth. An informant who is a bureau head in Asosa stated,

Those who were ousted from power [Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) leaders] were training the youth secretly on how to spread ideologically impactful historical narratives to destabilize the BGR. For example, the National Movement of Amhara⁶⁴ had opened a branch office in Asosa and Mätäkkäl and the complicit old politicians were agitating the youth by saying, 'Look, Amhara is coming back to power. Amhara does not respect the right of nations, nationalities and peoples. Amhara was your oppressor, and they are going to enslave you again.' It seemed true for the youth who had been taught division for the last twenty-seven years. Then based on these rumours, the youth went into conflict with Amhara and Agäw without distinction and the consequence is, as we see many people are displaced.⁶⁵

When Abiy Ahmed met residents in Mätäkkäl on 22 December 2020, the Gumuz representative, addressing the prime minister spoke:

What the Amhara region wants from the federal is to destroy us, as a junta?! I don't think so. I don't think so. In the eighteen era... eh... eh...

62 Interview, 10 September 2019, Agäw informant, Mandura.

63 Interview, 26 August 2019, Agäw informant, Gəlgäl Bäläs.

64 The National Movement of Amhara was officially established in June 2018 in Bahər Dar. The party is established and lead by scholars from various universities in Ethiopia to fight for the respect of Amhara ethnic group and challenge the ethnic-based attacks the Amhara people have faced under ethnic federalism.

65 Interview, August 2019.

eighteenth thousand era, there was slavery in the world that lasted for three years... eh hh... for thirty years. But, in Ethiopia, it lasted for over forty years until the nineteenth century. They enslaved us! If they wished, they could have built towers then. Slavery on the land of Beni Šangul-Gumuz again today? Why should this slavery come back again? Why does this happen? Why do they reinstate the past? [...] How can peace come with all these situations?⁶⁶

The speaker quoted above mirrors an important frustration among the Gumuz about land and enslavement, land understood in terms of the territorial concept. Whereas earlier I pointed out the dispute over land as an economic resource, in this case, the speaker is emphasizing slavery—his opinion sees it as even worse in Ethiopia than the rest of the world. What is more frustrating is apparently speakers at that meeting with the prime minister were recruited by regional authorities of BGR based on who would speak to the heart of the Gumuz people. The prime minister stated at the opening that the president of the BGR region would call on individuals in the audience and invite them to pose questions to the prime minister. Hence, one can assume that the opinion of the Gumuz representative is the opinion of the Gumuz community and the regional leaders.

Conclusion

The memory of the experience of slave raiding feeds the current interethnic relationship between Agäw and Gumuz and is often instrumentalized by political circumstances. Since 1991 and the establishment of ethnic federalism, the political environment created a fertile ground for the revival of memories of the historical experiences of slave raiding to redefine the relationship between the two groups. The memory of slave raiding is still being mobilized and implemented in everyday life, in land disputes, in election discourses, and more generally in the conflicts and displacements following the 2018 political reform. This political use of memory is not only limited to the political cadres of the BGR. As ethnic politics has played a central role in Ethiopia since 1991, memory of slave raids also enters the discourses of ordinary people and their everyday relations. In fact, different actors keep the memory of enslavement alive—drafters of the constitution, local cadres of the Gumuz during EPRDF, and the cadres of TPLF who were ousted by the new political leadership that took power in 2018. The politics of memory are indeed at play in a multi-ethnic region of Ethiopia historically shaped by the experience of slave raiding.

66 ESATv 22 December 2020, **ጠቅላይ ሚኒስትር አብይ አህመድ ከመተከል ሆን ነዋሪዎች ጋር ዛሬ የደረጉት ውይይት ታህሳስ** ('Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed held a discussion today with residents of Mätäkkäl Zone') (translated from Amharic), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eEm9xK-UUfl> (last accessed on 14 June 2025). See also Nyssen 2021, 8).

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The Power of the Past: Slavery, Stigma and Social Stratification in Western Wälläga

SOPHIE KÜSPERT-RAKOTONDRAINY

Summary

Slavery and labour relations have transformed the society of western Wälläga, Ethiopia, over the last decades. The social hierarchies these transformations have given rise to, and the concurrent degrees of freedom and unfreedom which over time have taken shape in this society, are today incorporated by ethnic categories. This creates a highly stratified society where traditional hierarchies and social labels exist side by side with more recent ethno-political labels, further complicating the landscape of diverse languages and cultural expressions. This paper deals with a category of people often referred to as 'black Oromo', a term suggesting slave descent. On which grounds are these people categorized as such and what does this imply for their status and prestige in the current society? The research looks at the connection between these putative slave descendants and people identified as Mao. Which historical processes caused this connection and how does this translate into understandings of rank and hierarchy? The research shows that there are several individuals and families who are categorized as Oromo but stigmatized as descendants of slaves, and who until this day have not been able to blend into either the Oromo or the Mao community. Thus, they seem to remain 'in between' and are at times rejected by both sides.

Introduction

Local communities in the westernmost part of Oromia Regional State in Ethiopia operate with an array of designations that denote an individual's ethnic identification, social status, and presumed origin. These are not all equal in terms of status or local understandings of honour and may carry moral connotations. One label may at once convey several, often contradicting, connotations. Some of the identities suggest slave descent and—depending on the context—a slave may be associated with one or another ethnicity, Mao or Oromo. The social inequalities in this research are conditioned by terms signifying relations of dependence and labour that have lost their original functions. At the same time, social prestige is influenced by the political dynamics of ethnic federalism. What has evolved is a society that is not only ethnically stratified but one in which hierarchies operate across and within ethnic groups and where new categories of difference or new connotations of existing categories have developed.

The division of Ethiopian society into ethnic groups, usually called Nations, Nationalities and Peoples, is usually taken for granted in politics, popular por-

trayals, media and even research.¹ The region in which this study is placed, Oromia Regional State, is, as the name indicates, understood as the region of the Oromo people.² In the westernmost part of the region, in the districts (*wäräda*) Begi, Kondala and Babo Gambel, around 10 per cent of the population is classified as Mao, a category understood to denote an ethnic identity distinct from Oromo.³ Individuals and families who, in whispers, are referred to as *garba Oromoo*, meaning ‘slaves of Oromo’, or labelled with the euphemism *Oromoo gurraača* (‘black Oromo’) often live within Mao communities.⁴ Pioneering research on the issue of slavery and its legacies indicates a relationship between Mao and slavery and may even suggest that ‘Mao’ and ‘slave’ in some contexts may mean the same.⁵ Historically, this is a valid postulation when arguing from a point of view of increased Oromo hegemony over the area; some of my Oromo interlocutors also used the two labels interchangeably. However, it is not possible today to know if the relationship between the categories ‘Mao’ and ‘slave’ is based on historical realities or created by their shared social inferiority in terms of wealth, political authority, and social power, and justified by their skin complexion.

When someone is called *garba* (‘slave’), it does not only denote their ancestor’s state of bondage but indicates the prestige and honour of their family. This can explain why being labelled a ‘slave’ is deeply shameful for those labelled as such and not only a description of living conditions several generations ago. The term ‘slave descendant’ is not used—the only designation in use is ‘slave’. Therefore, individuals who identify as Mao often emphasize their ancestral ‘purity’ to create a boundary between themselves and individuals whose genealogies are believed to be ‘lost’ or discontinued because their ancestors were enslaved and eventually assimilated into the lineages of their masters.

1 *Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia* 1994; Vaughan 2006 has a similar observation.

2 *Revised Constitution of the Oromia Region* 2001

3 According to the 2007 census, there are 24,272 Mao in Oromia (Population Census Commission 2008).

4 The term ‘black Oromo’ which is sometimes encountered in English is a translation of the Oromo word *Oromoo gurraača* (lit.: ‘black Oromo’) or the more commonly used term *garba/garbiča Oromoo* (lit.: ‘slave of Oromo’). I have decided to use the basic form of the noun (*garba*) here only and not the definite form (*garbiča*) or the plural (*garboota*). ‘*Leeqaa gurraača*’ (lit.: ‘black Leeqaa’—referring to the Oromo-speaking Leeqaa clan of the Mäčča) or ‘*garba Leeqaa*’ (lit.: ‘Leeqaa slave’) is people may use as alternative terms. In the various Mao languages, there are equivalents of this term, such as in Hozo, where it is *gala gamt’a* (lit.: ‘slave of “Galla” [Oromo]’). I am not arguing that all Oromo with a darker complexion necessarily have any association with slavery, or that descendants of slaves necessarily need to have this complexion.

5 González-Ruibal 2014; James 1980; Meckelburg 2018.

Increased focus on mutually exclusive ethnic categories may, therefore, aid ethnically conscious Mao in distancing themselves from individuals of alleged slave descent. My main argument is that the categorization of an individual as a 'slave' is an effective way of excluding certain low-status individuals from membership in any ethnic group and is a way of legitimating present social hierarchies.

In this paper I will investigate how history and identities are negotiated and created among individuals who associate with various social and ethnic categories that operate in the society of western Wälläga.

Neither Mao, Oromo, nor the individuals among them believed to be of slave descent operate as distinct groups in the society, as these identities are constantly negotiated. Even with the existence of Mao languages that are mutually non-intelligible and different from the Oromo language, the speakers of these languages do not form unified groups.⁶ Fredrik Barth noted that ethnicity can primarily be studied through the creation of boundaries between identities rather than the separate 'cultural stuff' associated with each ethnicity, such as language or customs.⁷ Hence, instead of portraying the various categories of difference in western Wälläga as distinct entities (groups), we can instead argue with Rogers Brubaker that processes of 'groupness' take place in the local society.⁸ This happens on several levels simultaneously with the result that ethnic boundaries do not correspond with categories based on identification as 'slave' or 'pure'. This paper explores the connection between putative slave descent and contemporary categories of hierarchy and investigates how the discourse on slavery in western Wälläga constructs a narrative that intends to explain how 'slaves' became so-called *Oromoo gurraača*. To do so, the paper will start with a brief historical backdrop against which we can understand the current developments. It will then analyse, firstly, the popular interpretation of the historical creation of

6 See Bender 1975; Küspert 2015. Non-Oromo languages spoken in the area are of the Koman and Omotic language families, different from the Cushitic Oromo language. The linguistic diversity is too complex to do justice to in this research note. However, it should be mentioned that the term 'Mao' may be accepted as self-designation for some, but not all speakers of these languages. Speakers of the Omotic languages Hozo/Shuluyo (*ak'mo wandi*) and Seze accept the term Mao as a self-designation, as do speakers of the Gwama language who live in the Oromo-dominated highland, whereas it is not used by Gwama-speakers in the western lowland towards Sudan.

7 Barth 1998, 6. Despite Fredrik Barth's revolutionary contribution to the study of ethnicity (cf. Jenkins 2008, 12) he has later been criticized for portraying ethnic groups according to the primordial idea that 'ethnicity as something that exists outside of the behaviour of people' (Cohen 1974, xii; cf. Brubaker 2002, 169; Eriksen 2010, 63).

8 Cf. Rogers Brubaker on ethnicity as a category of practice, which does not mean that all who identify with this ethnic label act as one group 'to which interests and agency can be attributed' as I will also argue throughout this paper (Brubaker 2002, 164).

the category ‘slave’; secondly, how the slaves are believed to have been incorporated into Oromo lineages and the relevance for today’s Mao category; and, thirdly, the racially stratified society which causes processes of groupness among the part of the population with a darker skin complexion than Oromo (‘black’) but also contributes to cementing their stigma. This paper will not deal with Mao in Beni Šangul-Gumuz, where individuals of prestige and often a lighter skin complexion have taken ownership of the label Mao as an identity that implies political power.⁹

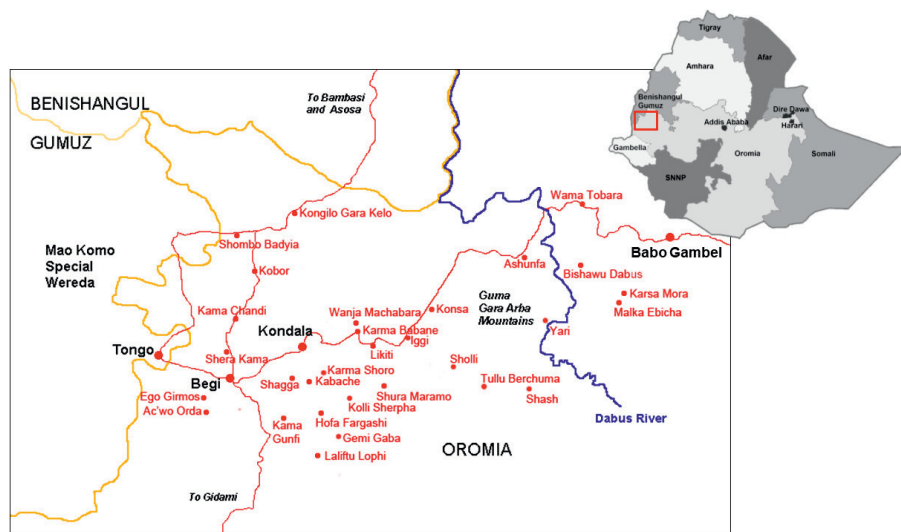


Fig. 1 Map taken from Küspert 2015, adapted by the author.

Methodology

This paper is concerned with a particular aspect of my research on social hierarchies in western Ethiopia. My research deals with interactions between individuals who make use of various social identities and labels. It focuses on the term ‘Mao’, which at once represents an ethnonym and a social status. This paper is based on a research journey that started in 2017 with the finding that some individuals and families in western Wälläga are categorized as descendants of slaves. In the initial research for this paper, I did twelve formal in-depth interviews, mainly on the topics of ethnicity, social cooperation, history, and slavery. Starting June 2020 over the period of a year, I conducted more than a hundred

9 For the discourse on Mao in Beni Šangul-Gumuz, see Meckelburg 2019; Küspert-Rakotondrainy 2021; cf. also Takele Merid and Desalegn Amsalu in this Supplement for analysis of other groups in Beni Šangul-Gumuz.

additional interviews and had countless informal conversations on this or similar issues, with individuals from villages spread over the whole area from Begi in the west to the Dabus River in the east, including individuals from across the Dabus.¹⁰ Throughout my research, I lived in the homes of my local hosts.

Most of my interlocutors from this area self-identify as Mao and have Seze, Hozo (different varieties), or Gwama (often called Kuro) as their mother tongues. Several of my research participants, however, self-identify as Oromo and among these some trace their genealogy back to enslaved ancestors. Where applicable, I have mentioned my interlocutor's ethnic affiliations in the text. Most interviews were done in Oromo with translation into Amharic but, as my Oromo improved, the conversations were held increasingly in Oromo with the occasional help of a local interpreter. The quotes from the interviews in this paper are from the direct transcription into English from audio files in Oromo or Amharic or from fieldnotes. I have frequently gone back to check the original recording for the vernacular terms used. I also sought to investigate key terms in the local Mao languages to understand their use and connotations. All my interpreters and research assistants were local people from the area (Beni Šangul-Gumuz or Oromia) and I paid particular attention to power relations between interpreters and interlocutors.

Background to the Area

Linguistic and archaeological research suggests that the area of today's western Wälläga was inhabited by people who spoke languages similar to some of today's Mao languages, and had a material culture resembling that of today's Mao, long before the immigration of other people.¹¹ The first wave of immigrants were the Kāfa-speaking Bušašo (Busase) who, according to what has been transmitted over generations and reconstructed by oral historians, used original inhabitants as serfs or domestic slaves.¹² Starting from the seventeenth century the western part of Ethiopia experienced a massive immigration of

10 I also spent a considerable amount of time in Mao Komo special *wäräda* in Beni Šangul-Gumuz Regional State and interviewed numerous individuals there. These interviews have not directly been included in the data informing this paper.

11 Fleming 1984; González-Ruibal 2014. Linguistically, this refers to speakers of the Omotic languages usually classified as Hozo, Seze and Bambasi Mao (cf. Küspert 2015).

12 Werner Lange (1982) reconstructed the history of the Omotic-speaking kingdoms of southern Gonga, such as Kāfa, Šeka, Boša; and Hinnaro, and their spread over the whole area of western Ethiopia before the advancement of the Oromo in the seventeenth century (cf. Grottanelli 1940). Oromo oral history confirms that the Mäčča met Gonga polities in the Gibe valley, which they pushed westwards and their subsequent entry into Anfillo south of Begi/Gidami (Girma Mengistu 1973; Lange 1982; Negaso Gidada 2000).

Oromo-speaking people of the Mäčča branch.¹³ During their expansion, Mäčča pioneers encountered various societies which they fought, expelled, assimilated or enslaved.¹⁴ For example, the Busase were completely absorbed by the Mäčča.¹⁵ Most assimilated people became part of a majority social stratum called *gabbaro* which comprised lower-rank, free citizens, who were ranked equally to the *borana* ('pure Oromo' or *Oromoo qulqulluu*)¹⁶ except in matters of religious rituals.¹⁷ Mohammed Hassen suggests that as the Mäčča migration proceeded, society became increasingly hierarchical and stratified, especially since the Mäčča started taking slaves for domestic work and farming.¹⁸ Particularly individuals of different physical appearance and complexion than the Oromo were subject to enslavement and became known as *garba* ('slaves'). These were not eligible for adoption (assimilation) into Mäčča lineages similarly to other non-Mäčča communities.¹⁹ As the Mäčča moved further into the settlement area of the Mao, they started taking slaves they identified as Mao, whom they used for domestic work.²⁰

Wendy James and researchers after her propose that the term 'Mao' has come to designate all non-Oromo people in the area who live in a subordinate relationship with the Oromo, regardless of language and self-designation.²¹ She argues

13 See Fleming 1984; Gonzáles-Ruibal 2014; Meckelburg 2018. In this paper, I will not focus on the immigration of people from the west (Sudan), usually classified as Arab and Berta, as these groups play a relatively minor role in this discourse. For an introduction, see Bahru Zewde 1976 and Meckelburg 2019.

14 Bartels 1983; Negaso Gidada 2000; Tesema Ta'a 2006. Slave raiding was conducted by various other actors in the area, especially related to the slave trade with Sudan. Slaves were also frequently used to pay tributes to the central Ethiopian government until the early twentieth century. Jan Hultin (1987, 1–19) argues that the Christian kingdoms had already caused havoc in the local communities before the Oromo arrived. This paper deals with domestic slavery only. For a detailed overview of the slave trade, see Bahru Zewde 1976; Triulzi 1981; and Abdussamad H. Ahmad 1999.

15 Girma Mengistu 1973.

16 The term *qulqulluu* in Oromo means clean but also has the connotations 'holy' and 'pure'. It is therefore used to refer to ancestry assessed as exclusively 'Oromo'. *Borana* is today an outdated term.

17 Bartels 1983, 159. It was the *borana* who could channel the blessing of their God. However, it also had social implications as a son of a *borana* father and a *gabbaro* mother was seen as having less 'boranaship' (*sic, ibid.*) than their father, and even less if their mother was a slave. This paper does not deal with craftworkers such as blacksmiths and weavers, and tanners (*faqi* and *tumtu*) who often live as excluded communities (cf. Epple 2018).

18 Mohammed Hassen 1990. See also Asmerom Legesse 1973; Paulos Daffa 1984.

19 Tesema Ta'a 2006, 45; cf. Triulzi 1996.

20 Bartels 1970; Bartels 1983.

21 James 1980; James 1981. It is unclear if the term Mao comes from the word for 'man' in some Omotic Mao languages (Bender 1975) or from the word *mawo*, meaning 'serf' in Kāfa (Lange 1982, 242).

that it is a term imposed from the outside ‘rather than a matter of aboriginal ethnography’.²² Accordingly, Mao denotes people who accepted a close relationship with the Oromo, as opposed to those who, in the face of the Oromo expansion, retreated to the lowlands. James further states that ‘all the local black population, whatever language they speak or whatever their origin, including Oromo-speakers whose families were formerly local slaves, are called “Mao”’.²³ Recent studies have likewise reported a high degree of stigmatization based on the relationship between ‘being Mao’ and ‘being a slave’.²⁴ Alexander Meckelburg argues that ‘the trajectories of slavery become underlying patterns that frame the interaction of people in the region today’.²⁵ However, to understand how these patterns have been shaped, it is necessary to explore the history of rank and status, and how they relate to these ethnic labels.

As mentioned above, Mao are usually described as people who were not eligible for adoption (i.e. inclusion as members of Mäčča clans) because they were portrayed as enslavable (and substantially inferior) in Mäčča ethics of slavery. This indicates that slave status did not necessarily come from a de facto state of bondage of all Mao individuals, but from the mere identification of certain groups, in this case Mao, as ‘enslaveable’ people. The Mäčča society employed different adoption rituals for various purposes. The ritual *medhičaa* was often used for the mass-adoption of a whole foreign clan through conducting the ritual with one representative of this clan, as happened with the Busase.²⁶ Similarly, *guddifačča* was a ritual used to adopt an individual (often a child) into a Mäčča family and lineage. The ritual *lubabasa* (from *basu* ‘to set free’), in contrast, was mainly used as a ritual for the freeing of slaves. Through this ritual, former slaves or individuals of slave status were incorporated into the Mäčča lineage of their masters.²⁷ Although slaves could be freed through this process, this did not necessarily mean that everyone in the society lived as equals; descendants of adoptees with former slave status or freed slaves remained distinguishable.²⁸ Lambert Bartels recounts various genealogies where Mao men had been admitted to an Oromo clan and figured as normal *gabbaro*, but their ‘non-Oromo

22 James 1981, 29.

23 James 1980, 62.

24 González-Ruibal 2014; Meckelburg 2018; Meckelburg 2019.

25 Meckelburg 2015, 346. It is not within the scope of this paper to discuss the types of slavery in the region, along with the various manifestations of the stigma related to slave descent. Elements of this discussion are part of my PhD research (Küspert-Rakotondrainy 2023).

26 Negaso Gidada 2000 86–87. The Busase are said to have become the *medhičaa* of the Sayo, a Mäčča clan (ibid., 89).

27 Bartels 1983, 167–168.

28 Hultin 1987, 1–19; Negaso Gidada 2000; cf. Blackhurst 1996.

descent is never forgotten and will be unearthed as soon as a marriage is at stake'.²⁹

Jan Hultin, who carried out research among the Sibuu Oromo in western Wälläga, argued that the term *gabbaro* was rarely used in the westernmost part of Ethiopia.³⁰ Instead, a usual term for the majority population was *ilma garba* meaning 'son of slaves'.³¹ Hultin's informants, who identified with this term, saw themselves not so much as descendants of assimilated non-Oromo people, but as 'dropouts' from the *gadaa* system.³² Thus, 'sons of slaves' were not necessarily seen as slave descendants, and could even be as 'pure' as *borane*—quite different from a biological son of a slave. This social category of *ilma garba* thus came to be comprised of people with a wide range of backgrounds and was, allegedly, not a derogatory term. I have not come across the use of the term *ilma garba*. Interestingly, it is the term *garba* (lit.: 'slave') today which is used to express slave descent' whereas *ilma garba* (as in 'slave descendant') is not in use anymore. This change of terminology exemplifies the complexity of social hierarchies and the shifting semantics in study.

Two Family Biographies of *Oromoo Gurraača*

In this paper, I will repeatedly use the examples of two individuals and their families. Umar Leellisaa³³ is a man identifying as Mao from Gunfi *qābāle*, Kondala *wārāda*. He has three wives, two of which are from Mao families—one speaks Seze like Umar and the other Hozo. The third wife, a lady called Dirribee Abdul, is Oromo-speaking and from an Oromo clan. She self-identifies as *Oromoo gurraača* ('black Oromo'); her great grandfather is believed to have been raised as a slave in an Oromo household. The second case is that of Fayisse Waqene from Bišawu Dabus *qābāle* in Babo Gambel *wārāda*. She says that the local community call her family *garba* because her ancestors on both her mother's and her father's side are said to have been bought as slaves. However, contrary to Umar, who owns some land, Fayisse's family is landless and several of her relatives work as domestic labourers in the households of wealthier families.

29 Bartels 1983, 175.

30 Hultin 1987, 1–19. Hultin arrived in western Wälläga in 1968 and did the bulk of his fieldwork around 1970. He wrote his essays between 1974 and 1984. To my knowledge, no newer research has taken up his findings.

31 *Ilma* means son and *garba* means slave in Oromo language. In this word order, it indicates a genitive case.

32 The strict adherence to the laws of the *gadaa* produced a significant number of people who fell out of the system during the course of the generations as opposed to those who were descendants from people who had undergone all the stages of the *gadaa* system and matured according to the prescribed progress.

33 All names of individuals in this paper are pseudonyms.

Fayisse self-identifies as Oromo but at the same time acknowledges that her family has little in common with ‘red Oromo’ (*oromoo diimaa*) or *Oromoo qulluu* (‘pure Oromo’) in kinship relations or communal cooperation. In both cases of Umar and Fayisse’s families, the boundary is between ‘red’ and ‘black’ and not between Mao and Oromo.

The communities in the area of this study are mainly rural and most families are subsistence farmers. Some of the farmers own more land than others, and those who own little or have limited economic means to invest in the land that they have, may work for other farmers as daily labourers or engage in various mutualist agreements such as sharecropping or labouring to pay for the use of another farmer’s oxen, a practice called *qote qotanna*. In general, the majority of those who own little land and work for others are referred to as Mao and some of them may be classified as slave descendants by their neighbours.³⁴ As elsewhere in Ethiopia, slave descendants remain economically and socially vulnerable and excluded from politics.³⁵

Creating the Category of Slave

‘They come from black people or from slaves.’³⁶

Stories about slavery are told and retold from generation to generation in western Wälläga. Some of my older interlocutors can also remember that their parents bought or sold slaves.³⁷ It used to be possible to buy slaves at the market ‘like sheep and goats’, said one of my interlocutors. Another way to obtain slaves was by capturing them in conflicts or raids. Additionally, it seems to have been common that poorer families voluntarily asked to work on the fields of wealthier landlords, which would protect them against raids and secure their basic needs. Often, members of these families are called ‘slaves’ in retrospect because they are believed to have lost memory of their own ancestral origin. According to my interlocutors, one way of distinguishing all these differently acquired slaves and their descendants is by their darker complexion.

According to all of my interlocutors, individuals described as *garba Oromoo* today are believed to either be descendants of freed slaves, or descendants of foster children of low status, adopted by wealthier families, as we will discuss

34 No in-depth studies on the socio-economic situation in the area have been carried out but the lower economic capacity of Mao is suggested by Gonzáles-Ruibal 2014 and Meckelburg 2019 and builds on findings from James 1980 and echoes my findings from the fieldwork.

35 Freeman and Pankhurst 2003; Epple 2018.

36 Interview with a young man in Begi, 29 June 2020.

37 This was in the 1940s and 1950s after slavery had officially been abolished.

below.³⁸ Thus, there are families of *garba Oromoo* living in the already mixed Mao/Oromo communities, who are identified by their neighbours as descendants of slaves whose master may be known or unknown. These families of alleged slave descent appear to have a lifestyle like that of other Oromo, although they are often among the poorest. They are usually monolingual in the Oromo language and do not have any attachment to a particular Mao clan. However, they seem to be separated from the mainstream Oromo society, noticeable through the added word ‘black’ (*gurraača*) or ‘slave’ (*garba*) when they are described—hence, they are ‘classificatory slaves’, meaning that they experience stigma ‘on the grounds of inherited or putative slave status’.³⁹

Like in other areas and cases (see also introduction to this volume), the two terms *gurraača* and *garba* are used interchangeably in many contexts, and I have frequently heard a statement like the following by Umar: “‘Black Oromo’ and ‘slave’ has the same meaning’.”⁴⁰ A young Mao man from Boği Gara Arba *qābāle*, Kondala *wārāda* said, ‘They [the “black Oromo”] only have the name “Oromo”, but they are slaves. They are not Oromo.’ In fact, several people told me that they would regard children from these ‘slave families’ as ‘slaves’ regardless of their educational level or wealth. ‘Even if they are rich (*soreesa yoo taa’ni yuu*), they will never be like the red Oromo. They will always be regarded as slaves (*akka gaarbaati laakaa’mu*)’, said a Mao man from Bišawu Dabus *qābāle*, Babo Gambel *wārāda*. Thus, an inseparable link between ‘black’ and ‘slave’ is made. In such a ‘racialized discourse’, whoever is Mao has to reflect on and deal with the concept ‘slave’, as we will see.⁴¹

The category *garba* (‘slave’) and its counterpart *qulqulluu* (‘pure’) are used—similarly to ethnic categories—as mutually exclusive categories. Although the society is formally categorized solely on ‘ethnic’ grounds (cf. the constitutional Nations, Nationalities and Peoples), other categories exist parallel to the ethnic structure and operate with no less static and primordial categories. Hence, processes of groupness happen on several levels simultaneously; categories of ethnicity do not correspond with the categories created based on identification as ‘slave’ or ‘pure’. These are treated as constant, opposing categories although they are applied flexibly depending on the situation.

As a result, several of my interlocutors argued that the *garba Oromoo* were not Oromo, but Mao. ‘Even if they don’t know the language, they are Mao’,

38 Although the term used here is *garba*, the way these people left the house of their masters to start their own family, a more correct traditional term to use would probably be *manbate* (cf. Bartels 1983). I have not come across this term in the area.

39 Rossi 2009, 5.

40 Cf. Smidt 2011 on a similar case in western Tagray.

41 Burnham (2009, 208) argues that in some contexts, “‘slavery” has become part of racialised discourses of status and identity or has otherwise acquired new semantic connotations’.

stated an elderly Mao man from Guma Gara Arba *qābāle*, Kondala *wārāda*. In the words of one of Umar's relatives: 'The Oromo still call him Mao, even if he doesn't know how to speak Mao. Even if he's living with them, they still call him Mao. He is in between. He can be called neither Mao nor Oromo.'

Caught in this ambivalence, an Oromo-speaking man from Begi introduced himself as Oromo when we first met. However, as our conversation on Begi's history progressed, he told me that his mother had come from Gambella and his father had been Mao.

I descent from Mao. My father was Mao.

Do you know the language?

I don't know it.

Did your father or grandfather speak 'Mao'?

My father was born in [name of a nearby village]⁴² too. My grandfather was from [another village]. They spoke Oromo, all of them. They were together with the Oromo.

After this, the conversation took another turn, and I was unable to return to the question of his ancestors.

Later, his neighbour from another part of Wälläga confirmed the story and then made the following comment: 'We don't know the classification—Mao, Komo, slave, whatever.' For this man, and speaking for all Oromo-speakers, I interacted with, 'Mao' or 'slave' seemed to refer to the same category of people. Hence, my interlocutor with the 'Mao' father was for him a 'slave' and not an Oromo. The category 'Mao-Komo-slave' serves the purpose of creating a boundary to Oromo. As Thomas Eriksen argues, ethnicity only functions in a relationship between different categories: 'To speak of an ethnic group in total isolation is as absurd as to speak of the sound from one hand clapping.'⁴³ Hence, categorizing all 'slaves' as Mao (and vice versa, right) protects the Oromo identity as 'pure'. Including all 'non-Oromo' into a group called Mao creates a distance to Oromo at the same time as it is inseparably linked to the Oromo category, without which 'Mao' would not exist.

In contrast, the majority of my interlocutors did not portray slaves as the same as Mao. Particularly individuals identifying as Mao pointed to the fact that the slave families had been integrated into Oromo households and lineages by having been their slaves or servants several generations ago (see below), and that they were therefore not under any circumstances to be regarded as 'Mao'.

42 In order to protect the anonymity of my interlocutor, I cannot reveal the names of these villages.

43 Eriksen 2010, 14.

They ‘are slaves, [although] they live with us [Mao] and eat with us. They came from Oromo families and slavery is a heritage in their family’, said an older Mao man from Gemi Gaba. Umar from Gunfi argued that the slaves could come from any ‘black’ people in the area, and not necessarily from Mao backgrounds only, since ‘they came together from so many places. [The Oromo] just bought one [slave] which they brought home. [...] You cannot say, “this is a Mao person”.’ For example, the slaves of the powerful Oromo king Ğootee Tulluu may partly have been taken from the groups nowadays referred to as ‘Mao’, but also Dinka, Nuer, Komo, and other people groups towards the west and south.⁴⁴ Again, a boundary is made, but this time between slaves and Mao.

Being Mao, for many identifying as such, proves that none of their ancestors in the male line could have been enslaved because they otherwise would have lost their ‘maoness’ and would have become ‘black Oromo’. For example, their family would not count their ancestry back to an ancestor identified as Mao or speak one of the Mao languages in the area. This was said with pride by a young Mao man:

Mao people have ethnicity (*zär*)⁴⁵ and clan and language. Oromo slaves have no language or *zär* of their own. They take the clan of the people they grew up with. They are black. They became *garba Oromoo* by slavery.

Hence, a ‘Mao’ for him is a person who avoided enslavement by the Oromo and whose *zär* remained ‘pure’.⁴⁶ In other words, a Mao is, for this man, the opposite of a slave, and Mao clans are ‘purer’ than Oromo clans because they do not contain adopted, assimilated, or incorporated members such as the ‘black Oromo’.

44 Ethnic terms are today used by extending present identities into the past, but it is uncertain if the population around Begi and Kondala self-identified as ‘Mao’ several generations ago. Sources from the turn of the century indicate that the term ‘Mao’ may not have been widely used, and, instead, the term ‘Amam’ was used (James, Baumann, and Johnson 1996, xc and 40).

45 The Amharic term *zär* can be translated with ‘ethnicity’, ‘race’ or ‘ancestry’ in English. When someone is said to ‘have a *zär*’, it usually is meant to signify that this individual knows their genealogy and which clan their first known ancestor came from. Therefore, they cannot be a ‘slave’. Both individuals who identify as slave descendants and those who are not categorized as such usually believe that slaves lost the connection to their biological genealogy when they were sold. Their descendants are therefore ‘without *zär*’.

46 The discourse on ‘purity’ from a Mao perspective cannot be discussed fully here. The concept of ancestral purity is very important for many hereditary Mao. Being ‘pure’ means that no person in the male line of an individual is falsely claiming an ancestry that is not biologically theirs, e.g. a former slave who takes the ancestry of their slave master.

Although many ‘Mao’ are among the most disadvantaged in the local society—economically, politically and in terms of education⁴⁷—there is still a certain honour (*kabajaa*) attached to this label, at least in the eyes of those who identify as Mao. The concept *kabajaa*⁴⁸ in Oromo expresses ‘glory’, ‘honour’, or ‘prestige’ and is often linked to having a respectable or pure (*qulqullu*) ancestry (*zär*) and possessing inborn positive personality traits. Usually, ‘slaves’ are regarded as being born in a state that does not deserve *kabajaa*. For many individuals who identify as Oromo, however, the details related to the difference between ‘Mao’ and ‘slave’ are rather blurred, just like the Oromo man mentioned above who said ‘Mao, Komo, slave, whatever’. My ‘Mao’ companion who witnessed the conversation with this Oromo man was rather upset over his wording and later gave me a wordy explanation on why ‘Mao’ are the opposite of ‘slaves’. He and other young Mao men are part of a new generation who are working for more visibility of minorities in the society and the revival of Mao languages—and therefore need to distinguish themselves from slave status in a group-making process that emphasizes the ‘purity’ and honour (*kabajaa*) of Mao.

Processes of creating boundaries, such as those between Oromo and slaves, or Mao and slaves, are constructed through political and social processes, according to Abner Cohen.⁴⁹ They do not imply that stable *groups* are created. Rather, with Brubaker, we can argue that groupness happens as an ‘event’.⁵⁰ This means that groupness may occur in some situations but do not necessarily in others. As we have seen above, such an event of groupness may be created in the name of Oromo or Mao in contexts where the purity of ancestry is put in the foreground. Both events have the aim of excluding descendants of slaves as not ‘true’ members. As we will see below, other events of groupness occur among alleged slave-descendants and other ‘black’ peoples such as different Mao identities, especially in practical matters of social coexistence and kinship; in this circumstance, the boundaries are elsewhere.

47 For a more comprehensive discussion on Mao discrimination and in how far prejudices or stigma are attached to this label and what the consequences are, cf. Küspert-Rakoton-drainy 2023, 90.

48 This word in Oromo language is used about God and people alike. Old men from wealthy families with a long lineage are often seen as having much *kabajaa*.

49 Cohen here criticizes Fredrik Barth for operating with ethnic groups as ‘organizational vessels that are fixed, static, always there’ (Cohen 1974, xv).

50 Brubaker 2002, 168.

Adoption, Abolition and Continuation

‘That’s how she became Oromo.’⁵¹

The previous population in western Ethiopia has since the seventeenth-century immigration of Oromo-speakers been incorporated into Mäčča-Oromo lineages. As discussed above, the freeing of slaves through adoption was also permitted under certain circumstances. Many individuals categorized as *garba Oromoo*, who see themselves as members of regular Oromo lineages, count their ancestry back to a person who was allegedly bought as a slave. Fayisse can count four generations back in her father’s lineage before naming the ancestor she believes had been bought at the slave market in Bambasi. This ancestor, called Boği, had been ‘from Mao’⁵² according to Fayisse. He had then been incorporated into the household of his master, a man called Dureessa, whom Fayisse calls *bulcha* (‘buyer’). Fayisse’s father, therefore, claims Dureessa’s Oromo lineage, called *warra* Wayu (the clan/family of Wayu), and Fayisse also self-identifies as a member of the *warra* Wayu clan although she acknowledges that Dureessa is not her biological ancestor. The ‘real’ clan of her great-great-grandfather Boği is said to be unknown. It is this circumstance that causes Fayisse’s classification as *garba*. She is labelled a ‘slave’ although she leads an autonomous life because of her unknown ancestral origin.

The interview with Umar about his wife Dirribee, whom he labels ‘black Oromo’, may shed more light on the process of how freed slaves adopted the ancestry of their former masters—in this case, a lineage called Wanaga:

She [Dirribee’s ancestors] came from another place, but because the Wanaga raised her, she says that she descends from Wanaga.

For how many generations has her family been part of the Wanaga clan?

She doesn’t know where she is [her ancestors are] from. She just knows that she is from Wanaga.

How many generations has she been Wanaga?

She knows just three generations. She only knows those who were in Wanaga.

How come she ended up in Wanaga?

51 Interview with Umar Leellisaa, in Kondala, 19 February 2019.

52 This is a common way of explaining ethnic affiliation. What Fayisse means is that Boği was of Mao descent or from the Mao community.

Her parents were in Wanaga, she was born there. I don't know where she came from, I just know that she is from Wanaga. [...] Her family were slaves of the Oromo. That is how she became Wanaga.

Umar gave several examples of how people would grow up as a slave not knowing their parents or the lineage of their parents, and then would take the name and clan membership of the head of the household in which they lived.⁵³ Similar explanations were given by people from the Begi and Kondala area, both Oromo and Mao. 'The only way someone can become part of another nationality⁵⁴ is by slavery. They lose their previous genealogy and become part of the ethnicity of their masters', said a Mao man from Bišawu Dabus. Few of my Mao interlocutors knew of Oromo rituals for the freeing of slaves. A man from a wealthy Oromo family that used to have slaves, however, said that freed slaves were included in Oromo lineages through the ritual of *lubabasa*. Several individuals in his family, whom he now regarded as his relatives (uncles, granduncles, etc.), had undergone such a ritual. As explained above, *lubabasa* is a ritual for adoption which refers to the practice of freeing an individual and their family from slave status and hence making them members of an Oromo clan. One of my other interlocutors expressed that adoption was 'like a purification. They [the slaves or non-Oromo] need to do *lubabasa* to be blood-related to the Oromo.' Bartels describes how the slave was set free through a lengthy ritual that included most of the people in the village and several elders. Several times during the ritual, it was emphasized that the slave, although now free, would still be dependent on his former master and could never be more successful than him.⁵⁵

Abolition of slavery in Ethiopia was a long process that goes back to Emperor Mənilək II in the nineteenth century and officially ends with an edict in 1942, which, however, did not end all forms of slave-like conditions and unfree labour.⁵⁶ Several of my interlocutors reported that the slaves, when freed, stayed in their master's vicinity, similar to what is described by Bartels: the freed slave was to receive a specified plot of land from his former master the day he (and his family) was set free through the *lubabasa* ritual.⁵⁷ It is not uncommon that families of prestige in the local community have neighbours they regard as descendants of their ancestor's slaves. Often, these families may own a very small

53 Lambert Bartels (1983, 166) writes, 'Garbota [plural of *garba*] could never pass on their own name to their children. The latter were simply called 'Slave of N.N.'. Their master could sell them again and even freely dispose of their lives. Normally, however, mutual relations tended to be rather paternalistic.'

54 The word he used here is *sablammi* (or 'nationality'), a common political term in Ethiopia which can be understood as 'ethnic group'.

55 Bartels 1983, 167–177.

56 McCann 1988, 354.

57 Bartels 1983, 175.

plot of land. Although the slaves, after abolition, were ‘free to go home’ to wherever their families had come from, most of them may not have known where that was, and some may have chosen to stay with their former masters. One of my Oromo interlocutors said, ‘The slave descendants don’t know anything about their old clan and language. They are normal Oromo now.’ However, one could argue that they are not ‘normal Oromo’ in the sense that they remain stigmatized because of their family ancestry.

Today, several practices and processes seem to be mixed up. Sometimes, statements about the incorporation of individuals into the lineages of their slave masters refer to processes that happened many generations ago. At other times, they may refer to the form of adoption called *guddifačča* in Oromo. This is not primarily a ritual for the freeing of slaves but refers to raising a child in the home of their non-biological parents. *Guddifačča* is still common practice in the area today and is often welcomed as help for orphans or poorer families with many children. However, in cases where the child is seen as Mao and the foster family Oromo, it is usually not understood as adoption but a condition resembling slavery in the sense that the child is assumed to be used as an unfree labourer. Such an interpretation is aided by the practice of child labour, where male children from poorer families (often categorized as Mao) work as shepherds in wealthier households (often Oromo). These children may adopt the Oromo language as their mother tongue and some never return to their biological family. As a result, *guddifačča* has become associated with labouring and ‘slavery’. One can assume that some individuals or families, who today are labelled *garba Oromoo*, are descendants of slaves or adoptees into Oromo households, but others may be individuals from families that claim Mao lineage who have chosen to live ‘as Oromo’, for example after having been shepherds.

Racialized Groupness and Stigma

‘Black people have black children.’⁵⁸

Although racial categories, like ethnic categories, do not operate as unified social groups, racialized discourses may still evoke processes of groupness in the society of western Wälläga. In the words of Max Weber, ‘race creates a ‘group’ only when it is subjectively perceived as a common trait,’⁵⁹ Ethiopian scholars have argued that too much focus has been put on racial *groups* as constant entities in the interpretation of the history of slavery: slavery is not about ‘the reds’ versus ‘the blacks’.⁶⁰ At the same time, a more flexible interpretation of racial divisions does not make the experience of such divisions less real for affected

58 Interview with Umar Leellisaa, in Kondala, 19 February 2019.

59 Weber 1978, 385.

60 Yonas Ashine Demisse 2018.

individuals. 'Race' is often an attribute that individuals cannot escape, and which has practical impacts on their lives. In the area of study, racial categories are often morally qualified. Racial terms are at times used metaphorically and do not necessarily refer to the actual appearance of an individual. Most Mao are, therefore, described as black, whether or not they have a very dark complexion. Therefore, some of my Mao interlocutors have argued that they have a black appearance but by no means are *gurraača* ('black') like the *Oromoo gurraača* as the latter would imply slave descent.

Although today, many 'Mao' see themselves as very different from the 'slaves' and emphasize their 'Mao purity' vis-à-vis individuals without *zār* (ancestry), there is a sense of solidarity between individuals who identify similarly racially, regardless of the estimated 'purity' of ancestry. This transcends the boundaries of the ethnic categories Oromo and Mao. It could be interpreted as a continuation of the old Oromo categories of slave status as opposed to 'pure' descent (*borana*). Even the young Mao man mentioned above, who vehemently argued that Mao are not the same as slaves, has a 'black Oromo' mother. The belief that Mao and slaves come from the same group of formerly 'enslaveable' people is strongly reinforced, or even created, because they look similar in terms of skin colour. The racial classification is further influenced by the shared socio-economic status, making their social statuses nearly indistinguishable; there is often little difference in the social status between the categories of slaves and Mao.

A man from Guma Gara Arba *qābāle*, first, explained that there was no intermarriage between Mao and Oromo in the area. However, when confronted with his own words that his wife was Oromo, he answered, 'Those who are black can marry each other'. Umar from Gunfi had first talked about how the 'black Oromo' are just normal Oromo. Later, when talking about marriage, he said, 'He can just go to marry the same clan and then he can marry black.' Hence, the meaning of 'clan' here does not refer to his formal (Oromo) clan, but his classification as a 'black' person. This kind of construction of ancestry gives rise to a shared 'metaphoric kinship'⁶¹ among 'non-Oromo' as a distinct group of people with similar ancestral origins. My Oromo interlocutor from a former slave master's family in Begi referred to the members of his household, who were considered 'black Oromo', as 'unified' with the general black population like the Mao. He also acknowledged the limited intermarriage between people of a different complexion. Thus, for him, the question was clear: black Oromo are Oromo by label but, in reality, they have very little in common with the 'real' Oromo. Hence, although class and ethnicity are 'analytically distinct' as argued

61 Eriksen does not only talk about metaphoric kinship in relation to nationalism but also in the understanding of 'ethnic identities' (Eriksen 2010, 81).

by Pierre van den Berghe,⁶² they are, in the context of western Wälläga from the perspective of local discourses, indistinguishable. There are no separate 'black clans'. Clans are either classified as Mao or Oromo clans, but it is within and across these clans that there are racial hierarchies.

Umar explained that when the slaves 'got children, they grew, grew, grew and became many. Black people have black children'. This conveys the opinion that they would never leave this social stratum of slaves. I have often heard from individuals self-identifying as Mao that the main difference between Mao and Oromo is the colour of their skin, which also is the largest obstacle faced by Mao people trying to blend into Oromo society. Consequently, former slaves who display a different complexion will remain recognizable. In general, according to the insight gained so far, ceasing to be 'black Oromo' is as difficult as ceasing to be 'Mao' because of the apparent differences in appearance and because their ascribed family ancestry has become common knowledge in the community. Unless, as Fayisse says, her children 'forget' about slavery, they will remain a 'family of slaves'.

Conclusion

Who is seen as a 'slave', on which grounds, and with which implications? This question does not have a straightforward answer. I will here not present any general conclusions, but rather pose some questions that have emerged from the data collected. It is not clear if all slave descendants lack a longer genealogy, and if it is unknown which ethnicity their forefathers may have identified with or which language they spoke. Furthermore, not all people of slave descent are likely to be recognized as *garba Oromoo*. They may have managed successful ethnic passing into the mainstream Oromo society or positioned themselves as Mao. Alternatively, the fact that an individual who identifies as Oromo has a darker skin complexion, does not indicate slave descent. This research suggests that, as histories and identities are negotiated in society, the status of certain individuals is influenced by assumptions regarding who their ancestors were, the prestige of their assumed ethnicity, and their ancestors' putative, classificatory, or factual enslavement. Neither Mao nor Oromo, 'slave' nor 'pure', 'black' nor 'red' operate as groups in the society although there are processes of groupness that at times may create a sense of 'metaphorical kinship' within or across these categories. An individual's identification, however, is volatile and dependent on the situation, as different criteria for identification may be emphasized at different times.

It is likely that it was not the formal abolition of slavery that put the complex system of hierarchy into disarray based on various levels of bondage and free-

62 Van den Berghe 1975, 73, cited by Eriksen 2010, 60.

dom. Rather, the increased significance of ethnicity as the main category for social identification and classification in Ethiopia's political system, especially after 1991, has put categories and labels related to slavery in the background. In the system of ethnic federalism, citizenship rights are granted, and political participation is permitted for members of distinct ethnic groups (Nations, Nationalities and Peoples).⁶³ Hence, everyone is expected to have a clear ethnic identification. Since the discourse of ethnicity does not provide for categories and hierarchies other than differences in ethnicity, the way alleged slave descendants are referred to is likely to have changed from terms denoting the precise degree of enslavement or stage of liberation of an individual to the vaguer distinction between 'pure' and 'not pure'/slave. However, this does not mean that the hierarchies and relations created through labour relations and dependence have today ceased to play a role in social interactions.

Today, the terms *borana* and *gabbaro* (or *ilma garba*) seem to be disappearing while the category *garba Oromoo* ('slave of Oromo') remains. Despite the substitution of terms and the blurred distinction between them, the various forms of dependency and unfreedom may not necessarily have lost their practical significance. Status differences based on assumptions regarding the assumed prestige of an individual's ancestors still exist and have practical implications on the lives of the descendants. As knowledge of actual enslavement and bondage fades, the gradual and still ongoing process of liberation may happen through socio-economic emancipation rather than manumission from a specific master. This paper has, moreover, argued that in many situations it is not clear if a family is poor or landless because they are slave descendants, or if an individual is labelled *garba* because they are poor and landless. In the latter scenario, an increased living standard may make it less likely that an individual is categorized as a slave descendant.

This research argues that the distinction between the various hierarchical strata that were separate some generations ago, today have been overlaid but not rendered invalid by ethnic terms and classifications. This process has created the rather obscure category of *Oromoo gurraača* ('black Oromo') which is used as a euphemism for other identities that carry derogatory connotations. Consequently, it ascribes its bearer to a particular position in the social hierarchy. Simultaneously, a connection between *garba Oromoo* and Mao is made, although it is not clear if this connection is historical, or rather shaped by current social dynamics where all 'black' people are expected inevitably to have an ethnic origin other than *oromoo diimaa* ('red Oromo'). This bears witness to a multi-layered hierarchal system where being labelled Mao, on the one hand, implies a position vulnerable to marginalization, whereas on the other, gives its bearer a morally

63 Cf. Alem Habtu 2004; Aalen 2011.

superior or honourable position vis-à-vis an Oromo suspected of being of slave descent.

Thus, the category of 'slave' seems to be not only a continuation of historical stigma but also used to make sense of contemporary hierarchies. Subsequently, we could ask if the language of slave descent will be replaced by other rationales to account for hierarchies. Currently, the relationship between slavery (or slave descent) and kinship is interpreted within a racialized discourse about blackness. This cannot be separated from the issue of ethnicity, since some ethnic groups, such as Mao, are considered to be 'black'. Yet, the younger generation of Mao may seek to use ethnicity in an attempt to reclaim a stigmatized identity and associate it with notions of pride instead of linking their appearance and identities to slave descent. This may temporarily widen the gap between individuals categorized as 'slaves' and 'Mao', leaving the former in the precarious situation of not having full membership in either ethnic category (Mao or Oromo). However, it is unknown how this increased consciousness of ethnicity may alter the lingering slave status in society and impact the practical dimensions of this stigma.

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Part 3

Revisiting the Sources

Unsilencing the Archive: Enslaved Histories and the Ethiopian National Archives

LACY NOEL FEIGH

Summary

The main state archive of Ethiopia, the Ethiopian National Archives and Library Agency (ENALA), remains a rather under-utilized archive for scholars of slavery in modern Ethiopian history, despite a wealth of records from Emperor Ḥaylā Śəllase's reign until today. A brief search for 'slavery' or '*barənnāt*' in the archive's computer terminals yields only a handful of results, perhaps an indication as to why scholars have largely ignored it as a serious space of research. This article explores how historians of Ethiopia may also be guilty of the phenomenon Nana Osei-Opare has termed 'postcolonial African archival pessimism' when it comes to utilizing ENALA and other state archives for historical research. I argue that we should rely more on Ann Stoler and Marisa Fuentes's conception of reading *along* the archival grain to highlight the importance of state archives in modern Ethiopian history. To connect these arguments, I take an ethnographic approach of my own research in ENALA, where provincial prison records located in ENALA offer valuable insights into the abolition of slavery in Ethiopia in the middle decades of the twentieth century. This ethnographic approach also highlights the steps other scholars may take in order to make use of documents in ENALA.

I first visited the Ethiopian National Archives and Library Agency (ENALA) during the summer of 2016, after my first year of graduate school. Despite living in Ethiopia for two years as a Peace Corps Volunteer and often frequenting that area in Addis Abāba, I had never been to the large concrete building, set back a few blocks from the National Theater, which housed the state's main collection of records. I arrived, presented a letter from my advisor to the archivist, and was shown to the small row of old desktop computers to look for files. Knowing I was interested in slavery, I searched 'slavery' in English, then in Amharic, and again, having transliterated the Amharic *fidāl* into English letters. With each click of 'search' I felt increasing disappointment. Was this why so many scholars utilized oral interviews and foreign archives for Ethiopian history, I asked myself? Were the records simply not there? Had the Italians set everything ablaze during their brief occupation, or had the mysterious bureaucratic state simply hidden files deemed too sensitive for public consumption? But, then, what records *were* housed in this building responsible for maintaining the documents of the past?

This article shows that despite challenges to archival research, the state archival records at ENALA have been routinely under-utilized by historians of twentieth-century Ethiopia.¹ Though the process may seem daunting, taking the time to understand the organizational structure, combined with a willingness to explore a broader range of files, offers many possibilities for a new reading of Ethiopian history. ENALA contains a wealth of information: from administrative officials, private individual petitions, to building plans and much, much more. Unlike foreign archival materials, most of these documents were prepared and written by Ethiopians, largely unmediated by European officials. Utilizing the archival tools of Ann Stoler and Marissa Fuentes, who advocate reading *along* the archival grain, historians can use ENALA documents to render even those most marginalized of individuals, slaves, visible.

In his 2021 article in *The Journal of African History*, Nana Osei-Opare called for a rejection of what he has termed, postcolonial African archival pessimism—‘the argument that postcolonial African archives are too disorganized or ill-kept to be of much, if any, value in configuring postcolonial African histories.’² According to Osei-Opare, Western-trained historians ignore these archives precisely because they are believed to be too messy, inconsistent, and do not fit into easily prescribed methods of research.³ While Ethiopia’s own colonial legacy differs significantly from Osei-Opare’s case in Ghana, the anecdotal stories around the hesitancy to utilize ENALA strike the same chord. Stories are passed informally by researchers: from rumours that the Italians burned or took documents after the occupation in the 1930s, to explanations that the state has hidden certain papers, or simply that nothing is catalogued and looking through these documents is a waste of time. Each of these points likely bear some truth, but, even so, by ignoring the state documents at ENALA, historians of modern Ethiopia nonetheless miss out on a critical layer of historical knowledge.

A quick look into some of the most notable works on slavery in Ethiopia, and modern Ethiopian history in general, make almost no mention of ENALA. Most studies of slavery draw from imperial abolition proclamations, League of Nations Archives documents in Geneva, Frank De Halpert’s papers located at the Weston Library inside of the Bodleian Library at Oxford in the United Kingdom, and British Foreign Office Records in the British National Archives, and various European travelogues.⁴ At the other end of the spectrum are works that emphasize the individual experience—oral histories by freed slaves or their

1 Anaïs Wion has described the history of ENALA and the recent cooperation between Ethiopian and French archivists to make these and other documents at ENALA more accessible: Wion 2006.

2 Osei-Opare 2021, 5.

3 Ibid.

4 Examples may include Adom Getachew 2019; Allain 2006; Miers 1997; Whyte 2014.

descendants, files in the Institute of Ethiopian Studies (IES) at Addis Ababa University, and private family archives.⁵ Some of these collections tell a top-down history of the role of slavery and international institutions; others, from the bottom-up, the lived reality of enslaved individuals as remembered by their descendants. What is missing is the middle—the administration of slavery and abolition by the state, which includes the actual reception of laws that promised to free slaves trapped in states of bondage, and the letters, telegrams, and reports that circulated among imperial government officials, governors, and other interested parties.⁶ Documentation of these bureaucratic realities, and the lives caught between them, is what state archives like ENALA offer historians of Ethiopian slavery.

In *Along the Archival Grain*, Ann Stoler views the archive-as-process rather than as-thing and in doing so offers a way to view the production of colonial common sense, the negotiated legal and social realities which came to govern empire.⁷ Stoler analysed the Dutch Indonesian colonial archive, but this way of viewing the archive exists not only within a European colonial context; it is a broader framework for analysing state governance and control through the institutions they produce. Examining along the archival grain, illuminates the messiness of state policies, the ruptures and outbursts, as well as the continuities and repetitive flattening that built states.⁸ State archives like ENALA function within similar realities—administrators attempting to determine, regulate, and manage new policies across a growing and changing state. Through these state archives, we can also observe the recalibration of social categories and practices and how they gain relevance within the modern state.⁹

To understand this concept of reading along the grain, Stoler writes, '[archivists] are the first to note that to understand an archive, one needs to understand the institutions it served.'¹⁰ I would also posit the reverse: learning about the archive provides insight into the state and the archival bureaucracy which produces it, even when seemingly veiled. ENALA then, with collections from the Italian era, Emperor Ḥaylā Səllase's restoration, the *Därg*, and to a lesser extent the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPDRF), sheds light on each of these attempts to organize and re-organize state administrative structures. Stoler comments on the archive's ability to reveal concealment and shadows produced by the seeming drudgery, regulated boredom, and incompetence

5 Some examples include Garretson 2017; Takele Merid and Meckelburg 2024; Tekalign W. Mariam 1989; Yonas Ashine Demisse 2022.

6 Feigh 2022.

7 Stoler 2009, 20.

8 Ibid., 53.

9 Ibid., 34–35.

10 Ibid., 25.

of everyday bureaucratic institutions.¹¹ It is both in the repetitive ‘bureaucratese’ and the obscured shadows that the archive articulates the role of the state and its complexities.

Marisa Fuentes draws on Stoler’s work and shows how the imperial archive in Barbados perpetuated colonial power and language to render enslaved individuals criminal.¹² Fuentes extends beyond the archive to show how historians and other scholars must attempt to resist the ‘lived inequalities of our subjects and the discourses that served to distort them.’¹³ This work demands that scholars recognize both the violent ways enslaved individuals are written into the archive, through state officials eager to control them, and the ways they were erased, by states which attempted to hide or minimize their presence. It is striking that, despite the massive role slavery and abolition played in the making of the modern Ethiopian state, in ENALA there are no stacks of correspondence files from the League of Nations, British officials, or even Italian records. Each of these parties pressed Ethiopia to write extensively about abolition efforts, to produce reports and correspondence. The archives in Geneva, Oxford, and Rome offer one telling of a much larger story, on which ENALA and other Ethiopian archives are eerily quiet. Even when slavery or enslaved individuals whisper through the screens designed to mute them, we must remember the violence, physical and historical, which shapes their (in)visibility.

Going forward, I take an ethnographic approach: describing the archival work that led me to read the presence of slavery in the shadows of ENALA. I further the argument put forward by Osei-Opere, urging scholars of Ethiopia to utilize state archives like ENALA to gain a fuller understanding of the role of the modern Ethiopian state. Rather than viewing the inconsistencies as faults, I see them as possibilities—crucial ruptures of knowledge. The ‘immersement’ Stoler describes provides a better approach than ‘mining’ when it comes to archival research at ENALA, as it illuminates the very boundaries the state tried, and often failed, to construct.¹⁴ I show how when you read along the archival grain, the inconsistencies and the shadows provide a clearer understanding of state priorities and strategies—like those around the regulation of slavers and freed slaves in the twentieth century. In presenting this reading as ethnography, I hope to make visible the labour and knowledge that contributed to an immersive reading of ENALA.

When I reached my first technological dead end at ENALA, the search results on every variation of slavery and bondage yielding nearly nothing, the archivist handed me a bound volume of the finding guide for the ‘Ministry of the Imperial

11 Ibid., 26.

12 Fuentes 2016, 7.

13 Ibid.

14 Stoler 2009, 48.

Palace'. This finding guide, almost completely in Amharic, is organized in simple columns: file numbers, year spans, who was involved, a short description, and the general subject. One-word subjects like 'health' or 'tax' guide you to a year, and the short descriptions provide some understanding of what is within the file. At times, I thought the catalogue might be organized by chronology, but often a file from the 1930s is followed by one from the 1970s. It sometimes subtly shifts between the Julian and Gregorian calendars, often depending on the language of the documents.

That summer, I spent my time requesting random files and trying to get a sense of what they contained. Given the stringent rules on photographic reproduction at the time—no photos of files less than ten pages—and the unclear pricing standards, I largely explored files to see what I could find.¹⁵ My friend, longtime Amharic language teacher, and research assistant, Tigist Teshome, accompanied me to help skim faster and understand dated language and unclear handwriting. Together we went through many government reports, detailed municipal building plans, letters written on the back of old Italian files, and some accounts of individual protests. With no detailed contents list, we would flip to the back of each file (usually the earliest dated) and carefully turn through the sheer, sometimes clipped, pages—careful of the rusty pins holding the papers together.

During this process of random requests and asking the archivist which files might be useful for subjects related to slavery and labour, I noticed that quite a few files included topics related to prisons and prisoners. These files, I felt, deserved more scrutiny. Given my understanding of the legacies of slavery in the United States and other post-abolition societies—where many enslaved individuals were caught in rapidly expanding carceral states meant to control their bodies and their labour—I thought these lists might illuminate similar aspects of abolition in Ethiopia. Some of these files touched on prison labour, others reported of terrible prison conditions. Within these files, however, by dint of their formulaic language and small disjointed notes, the presence of slavery became clearer.

Tucked in file 17.1.8.24.03, from Käfa district, 'On Prisoners' Provisions' was a torn list and a short note on the next page, stating these prisoners from Ġimma prison had requested pardons from Emperor Ḥaylā Šəllase in 1938 *āmātā mārāt* (= 1946 CE).¹⁶ Tigist and I carefully unfolded the old grid-lined paper with handwritten green ink. On that list, beside individual names and

15 As of 2020, these rules have changed—ENALA still charges for photographic reproduction but is much clearer about policies.

16 በዓል ምሕረት የሚለመን ሰው እሥረኞች ዝርዝር (*Bä'al məḥərät yämillämmən säw əsräñoč zərərər*, 'List of Prisoners Begging for Mercy on the Holiday'), 1938 EC = 1946/1947 CE (ENALA 17.1.8.24.03).

length of sentences administrators recorded the reason for imprisonment of the first seven individuals: *sāw bāmāṣat* or ‘selling a person’. After so many disappointments, Tigist and I were shocked to find such an explicit implication of slavery in a file on prisoners. Further down on the list, several individuals were implicated for crimes related to raiding, or *bāfangāla*. Four individuals were also imprisoned for turning from ‘servants’, *lole*, to thieves, *šəfta*. That summer we found several similar records, almost all pardon petitions with varying degrees of information. These petitions proved the key to unlocking many similar records in ENALA, which shed light on the administration of slavery.

I returned to Ethiopia two years later determined to undertake a systematic search for similar records, or others which might illuminate the history of abolition enforcement in Ethiopia after the Italian occupation. On my return trip, Abiy Hailu, the director of the archives, helped me to improve my understanding of the ENALA’s archival system—including the catalogue I had viewed previously and additional printed finding guides for each province under Ḥaylā Šəllase’s administration. Using these provincial finding guides, I looked through each file related to courts, prisoners, or pardons, and found a number of similar documents. In the south-west province and districts, such as Ğimma and Kāfa, records offered more explicit connections to slavery; however, reading across provincial files delineated common patterns of abolition enforcement (or the lack thereof), which may not have been visible through a simple keyword search in a computer.

Given the south-west’s long history with slavery and abolition in Ethiopia and the presence of these records, I decided to go carefully through most of the Ğimma files to get a better sense of how other provincial files might be organized. I broadened my search to look through files related to labour, taxes, prisons, disasters, accidents, protests and those files that had remained mysteriously unnamed. The moment I saw a large, folded piece of paper in a folder, I was hopeful there would be another pardon petition with correspondence attached, providing an explanation for the list of individuals.

Among all of these files, one, marked only as ‘Ğimma *gəzat*’ (Ğimma province), contained a four-page list with 92 prisoners accused and convicted of crimes related to slavery.¹⁷ Pages of correspondence between state, provincial, and local officials showed that each level attempted to bring notorious slavers to justice in the 1940s. These letters indicated that at each administrative level, officials understood the challenges to abolition, but also recognized the international pressure which continued to push Ethiopia to stop slavery, even after the emperor had been restored to the throne in 1942. With no indication of its importance, not even in the printed finding guide, this file proved to be one of

17 በጅማ አወራጃ ግዛት ፍርድ ቤት (*Bäğemma awrağa gəzat fərd bet*, ‘From Ğemma provincial court’), 1936 EC = 1943/1944 CE (ENALA 17.1.1.85.01).

those moments of rupture, a break in the formulaic patterns of bureaucratic record keeping. It provided a point for connecting broad legislation with specific enforcement measures. Its notably unmarked nature also clearly indicated the hesitancy with which state archives approach difficult histories, especially around slavery.

Marked *məstir*, or ‘secret’, these documents were not meant for wide consumption, even amongst state administrators. This classification of documents illustrates state sensitivities to certain types of information which officials relegated to the shadows of the archive. Slavery, as it turns out was hotly debated in Ethiopia well into the twentieth century, despite attempts to deem it secret. By marking letters and documents in this file as secret, state officials tried to hide both the subject and debate from public view. The historiography on slavery in Ethiopia often ties the end of the institution to the Italian occupation; however, these documents show that debates on abolition enforcement continued into the 1940s and even the 1950s. But why hide Ethiopia’s unique attempts to hold slavers accountable post-abolition? After the Italian occupation, which itself was justified in part by reports of failed abolition measures, mere mention of attempts to enforce abolition measures threatened the weak imperial state by admitting the continued presence of slavery. Instead, slavery needed to be erased from the view of possible prying eyes—internally and externally.

This process of combing through files for specific information is often viewed by scholars as a hindrance, a waste of valuable research time, but it offers the opportunity to examine related files which academics might otherwise overlook. By their very nature, all archives are mediated, organized, collected, according to a specific logic. Keyword searches and other technologies have allowed scholars a precise ability, like surgeons, to extract exactly what they need from the archive. Such methods work well for finding the evidence most conveniently, but it also enables scholars to dissect documents out of context, to find those only directly relevant to their arguments and those deemed by the state as appropriate. Implementing a broader approach, expanding rather than narrowing the scope of research, creates an opportunity for new and expansive connections, even beyond moments of rupture. It allows us as scholars to ask broader questions and offer more complete answers.

After requesting many of the files on Ġimma and Käfa, I embarked on a more targeted process with other provincial guides—flipping through files related to prisons, crimes, and police, among others. Each region had its own system, but the documents retained a similar bureaucratic structure. Harär had the most detailed prison records, with a short description of the crime related to each individual prisoner.¹⁸ By contrast, Sidama contained almost no prison or court rec-

18 ሐረርጌ ጠ/ግዛት (*Haräрге ṭäl/(qläy) gəzat*, ‘Haräрге province’), n.d. (ENALA 17.1.7.30.06).

ords, outside of administrative salaries.¹⁹ Most provinces, like Bale or Wälläga, contained some prison records, featuring only sparse details.²⁰ This uneven pattern of administration speaks to the need for a more comprehensive analysis of the post-occupation era Ethiopian state than this short note can offer, but, here, it provides clues toward understanding the specific nature of abolition enforcement across the imperial state.

Even with very limited information, reading these files through the lens of the documents in south-west Ethiopia highlights important patterns. For example, similar patterns in language and sentencing indicated that even outside of the south-west, other provinces engaged in abolition enforcement. In Ğimma or Käfa, a man would only be sentenced to ten or more years for a crime related to slavery or killing a person. In Bale, several individuals were imprisoned for the general crime of *wämbade*, or acting as marauders, for ten or more years.²¹ The only other prisoners condemned to lengthy sentences were those convicted of murder. Though the language of slavery was not explicit, when viewed in the light of the south-west documents and a broader imperial context, the term marauder seems to be an abstraction indicating involvement in slavery. A softer idiom used in place of a more specific crime. A similar language emerged in Wälläga, along with the presence of some ‘raiders’. Only in reading across the archive do patterns like these emerge.

The shadows of the archive exist within both a physical space—like the secret, non-descript files—and within the language of the records themselves. Formulaic and seemingly sanitized state language can obscure the presence of slavery or other sensitive matters. Here scholars must do the more speculative work of reading across archives and across documents to grapple with obfuscation and absence.²² The exact language of slavery only sometimes entered these documents. In its place, the language was made obscure, implementing terms such as ‘raiding’, ‘marauding’, or ‘selling a person’, an abstraction derived from the quite explicit crime of ‘slavery’. Documents in the 1950s show the sudden disappearance of even these terms related to slavery at a time when slavers sentences had not yet ended, indicating a radical shift in state priorities. Reading archives broadly, immersively, renders these silences and ruptures that exist only at specific moments quite visible. Even if a keyword search had existed at ENALA, it would not have necessarily associated these words with slavery, and

19 ሲዳሞ ጠ/ግዛት (*Sidamo ṭä/(qläy) gəzat*, ‘Sidamo province’), n.d. (ENALA 17.1.6.27.02).

20 ባሌ አውራጃ ግዛት (*Bale awrağa gəzat*, ‘Bale province’), n.d. (ENALA 17.1.5.18.02); ወሊጋ ግዛት (*Wälläga gəzat*, ‘Wälläga province’), n.d. (ENALA 17.1.1.85.07).

21 ባሌ አውራጃ ግዛት (*Bale awrağa gəzat*, ‘Bale province’), n.d. (ENALA 17.1.5.18.02). My understanding of the term *wämbade* also comes out of conversations with Kefyalew Tessema and other scholars at the SLAFNET conference at the Institute of Ethiopian Studies in 2019.

22 For more on abolition and erasure see Baghoolizadeh 2024.

an entire trove of documents related to the topic may well have gone completely unnoticed.

In my work, language and subtle linguistic shifts shed light on the connections between slavery and criminalization.²³ In the early anti-slavery proclamations, prior to the standardization of a criminal legal code, the language of abolition tied freed slaves to criminality. Administrators rendered freed slaves as possible thieves, bandits, and criminals within abolition legislation itself. When slavers disappeared from the documents of Ġimma and Kāfa in the early 1950s, petition records listed more individuals imprisoned for petty crimes of ‘theft’ or ‘banditry’. The very language of sentencing is linked to the language of abolition in the 1920s. The state’s fear that freed slaves would commit these crimes led to state criminalization of these behaviours, which then led to the imprisonment of freed slaves, at the moment they actually gained freedom. Occasionally, a court case or pardon document notes the individual’s former slave status—the rupture that becomes a thin evidentiary link for patterns of language. These shifts, the language patterns of legislation and administration, create another layer of both obfuscation and recovery.

Reading archives immersively cannot be a solitary project—it depends on layers of knowledge, the excavation of which requires a team. Researchers offer nuanced questions, methodological training, and financial and institutional support. Language specialists parse through untidy handwriting and discuss veiled or anachronistic terms. Knowledgeable archivists steeped in organizational bureaucracy contribute navigational guidance. Not to mention the other scholars present at conferences and workshops to provide alternative readings and unique insights. As the archive houses the writings of many, the scrawls of state officials and petitions of dissidents, history too is a collective effort, the sum of many collective parts.

In places like the British National Archives, the researcher can be lulled into thinking of history as a solitary pursuit—an abstracted venture which rests on the historian’s knowledge alone. A researcher may request material ahead of time, receive it in a pre-assigned shelf with a red door, looking through each folder in silence, and return it to an unmanned desk; only speaking to whisper thank you to the guard who checks credentials and bags at the entrance to the reading room. But these highly ‘organized’ archival spaces are subject to the same state and imperial archival forces—collective efforts abstracted, hidden from the researcher. Each folder is carefully curated by archivists, organized around specific individuals, societies, moments. The assumed ‘access’ depends on familiar (to some), but no less bureaucratic policies required to prove resi-

23 I am further developing these ideas in a separate article, but see also Chapter 5 ‘Punishing Slavery, Enforcing Abolition’ in Feigh 2022, 262–302.

dency, academic affiliation, and strict regulations, which so often rule imperial archives in Europe and the United States.

My critique here is not to deem state and imperial archives as useless, messy, and sanitized institutions not worth the time or effort. Given the nature of states and empires to destroy or obfuscate documents, it is necessary to incorporate as many different collections as possible. Instead, I join with those scholars who insist that reading African archives, like ENALA, may not only help formulate better histories of Africa, but that in reading them we may also gain a far better understanding of those documents shaped and housed in Oxford, Geneva, Rome, and Kew. For if ENALA can allow historians to focus on enslaved Ethiopians—who by their very nature the abolitionist state attempts to render invisible—imagine the other possibilities archives offer historians willing to engage, understand, and read along and within them.

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Reading Fiction as History: Slavery and the Slave Trade in Gərmaččāw Tāklä Ḥawaryat's *Ali Habäši yä 'Edānu ġandäräba* (Ali Habäši, the Eunuch of Aden)

YONAS ASHINE DEMISSE

Summary

This paper treats a historical novel about slavery as an ethnographic and historiographical archive, looking for patterns, perceptions, and representations about the Red Sea slave trade. አሊ.ሀበሺ. የኢደኑ ጃንደረባ ልብ ወለድ, *Ali Habäši yä 'Edānu ġandäräba: Ləbb wälläd* ('Ali Habäši, the eunuch of Aden: A novel'), written in Amharic by Gərmaččāw Tāklä Ḥawaryat (1915–1987) during his imprisonment in the late 1970s, presents several references to slavery, in particular the violent practice of castration, the roles of castrated men, and their trade in Ethiopia and the Red Sea region.¹ Through various characters and narratives, the author provides insights into the lives of eunuchs in the Arabian Peninsula. This article uses the story of *Ali Habäši* as a space in which history and fiction converge and suggests the use of literature as a valuable source in gaining an improved understanding of slavery, the slave trade, and abolition in Ethiopia. Viewing literature as an imaginative platform and archive, this article aims to raise novel research methods to the study of slavers in the Red Sea region, combining historical analysis and fictional narratives. I suggest that focusing on *Ali Habäši*, a fictionalized account of Red Sea slave trade, allows us to overcome two limitations often encountered in historiographical work: firstly, it allows us to establish connections between the eastern and western Red Sea regions, tracing the routes of enslaved people from southern Ethiopia to the Arabian Peninsula. Secondly, the text sheds light on the everyday lives of ordinary slaves, often overshadowed by the focus on elite slaves, included in official historical sources thanks to their prominence.

Introduction

Historians noted that despite the historical practice of manumission and commitment to the abolition of slavery by the Ethiopian state, the practice of slavery continued well beyond the World War II. The movement of abolition started in the 1920s and evolved with a gradualist approach. The state had little capacity to stop slave raids and slave trades, despite the laws introduced against them.² Notwithstanding the growing public discourse supporting the idea of abolition, in the early twentieth century, in particular to appease international concerns, the emperor, the regional chiefs and the local chiefs actually interacted and negoti-

1 I am grateful to Berhanu Deboch for bringing the book to my attention and lending it to me, along with generous conversation over historical sources.

2 Takele Merid and Meckelburg 2024.

ated for resources such as slaves and gold.³ Even though slavery was finally outlawed in 1942, its legacies are visible today.⁴

Given the absence of slave narratives and autobiographies in the region, an effective approach to understanding the experiences and daily lives of slaves is to utilize literary works that focus on slavery in Ethiopia. Novels are products of the author's imagination and provide a construction of reality from a particular perspective. The author's viewpoint is influenced by the collective social and cultural imagination of their time, featuring concepts and categories collectively and socially constructed. Therefore, historians can employ fiction as a source to reconstruct the past. In this study, I take the literary work of Gərmaččäw Täklä Həwaryat, one of Ethiopia's prominent second-generation modern intellectuals, to present various aspects of the realities of slavery. I argue that novels, poems, and other forms of literature can serve as valuable sources for historical reconstruction and interpretation.⁵ In twentieth-century Ethiopia, where authors frequently merged history with fictional elements in their writing, such texts play a significant role in constructing the social history of subjects that may have limited presence in chronicles or hagiographic writings. In fact, it is essential for students of Ethiopia's social and political history to engage with these materials and consider historicizing and reconstructing social histories using literature. I argue that fiction can help us address the dearth of alternative sources such as slave-autobiographies or other ego-texts, that could otherwise allow the reconstruction of life histories of slaves.⁶ In exploring Ethiopian intellectual history, it is crucial to perceive texts (including literature), ideas, and concepts not as isolated entities but as interconnected components deeply embedded in the historical and socio-political context of their time. Here, I draw heavily from the works of Nancy Rose Hunt, particularly her exploration of fiction as an archive to understand abortion in Africa.⁷ History, according to Hunt, is both a 'social process', and 'forms of remembering'. Hence, 'if the idea is not only to *mine* novels for their ethnographic descriptions, but also to *mime* their figures and forms, narratological fluency may help the historian to see more clearly the wealth of possibilities for constituting a complex set of relationships among what happened'.⁸ Historical novels and fictions in Ethiopia can be highly valuable in comprehending the socio-political dynamics of Ethiopia's past. Both the historical elements and the imaginative literary components are equally beneficial for intellectual, social, and political historians.

3 Abdussamad H. Ahmad 1999; Coleman 2008; Garretson 1986.

4 Bonacci and Meckelburg 2017.

5 Elger and Köse 2010.

6 For memoirs as potential source for slave's lives, see Tolino 2023.

7 Hunt 2007.

8 Ibid., 280.

Ali Habāši skilfully combines elements of travel narrative and biography. The story revolves around an enslaved man whose life serves as inspiration for an Ethiopian traveller and scholar to become an abolitionist in Ethiopia. The term *ḥabašī* designates the Ethiopian presence in the Red Sea region and Arabia, building on the long-standing geo-cultural association with the toponym *Abys-sinia*. In the Arabian region, in India and the Indian Ocean world, individuals from various regions of Ethiopia were referred to, collectively, with the term *ḥabašī*.⁹

Unlike many prominent figures in the literature on slavery in Arabia and India, Ali was, however, not an elite slave who rose to political power, but a eunuch, known in Amharic as *ḡandārāba*. This term can denote a person of official status, such as a court official in Christian polity. The official status denotes an officer (*dārāba*) close to the king, indicating political association rather than physical condition.¹⁰ The term may also refer, though, to eunuchs. The violent operation of castration and the sale of eunuchs in Ethiopia date back to medieval times and are arguably one of the most infamous yet most understudied phenomena in the study of slavery in Ethiopia.¹¹ While we know that some individuals may have chosen self-castration for religious reasons,¹² others were forcefully castrated for profit by those who captured them. In addition to physical castration, other techniques were used to castrate within households.¹³ For example, rubbing young boys' testicles from childhood gradually made them sexually impotent and suitable candidates for being considered eunuchs, even though not physically castrated.¹⁴

The presence of eunuchs in political offices and the army made them prominent and notable in historical accounts. Pre-modern states utilized these enslaved individuals in their bureaucracy and military, effectively cutting them from their reproductive roles in a process of genealogical alienation.¹⁵ One of the ten classes of the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia, identified by *Abba Bahrəy*, were the retainers and protectors of royal women, possibly referring to eunuchs (known as *haṣwa* in Gə'əz).¹⁶ Henok Ḥaylā argues that Ethiopian eunuchs encompassed both a political role and a physical condition. A political *ḡandārāba* could hold official status without undergoing castration, unlike a physically castrated eunuch. Historical sources confirm the existence of both types in Ethiopia. Physically castrated eunuchs were often products of war. Victorious armies, looting

9 Astair Gebremariam Mengesha 2003; Jayasuriya 2008.

10 Henok Ḥaylā 2018/2019.

11 Burke 2009; Fauvelle 2018; Junne 2015.

12 Kuefler 2001.

13 Höfert, Mesley, and Tolino 2017.

14 Henok Ḥaylā 2018/2019.

15 Patterson 1982; Höfert, Mesley, and Tolino 2019.

16 Getaččäw Ḥaylā 2009/2010, 209.

the defeated, sometimes performed castration as a symbolic trophy of conquest. Many captured and emasculated soldiers were then enslaved.¹⁷

Writing from the Prison: The Author and the Political Context

The history of slaves and slavery is depicted through the recollections of Gərmaččäw, a political prisoner and second-generation reformist intellectual and author.¹⁸ Born in 1915 in Harär, Gərmaččäw, was the son of Täklä Həwaryat Taklä Maryam, and a prominent intellectual and statesman. Educated in Dərre Dawa and France, he had the opportunity to travel to France and Djibouti alongside his father. Serving as a governor in Illubabor, it is highly probable that he drew on his knowledge of slavery and the slave trade from the nearby Maği region. He also spent time with his father in Aden during the Italian occupation and its aftermath, thus experiencing both the eastern and western Red Sea coasts.

Gərmaččäw draws inspiration from his father, Täklä Həwaryat Taklä Maryam, a former member of parliament under Həylä Šəllase I. Täklä Həwaryat was the author of the first constitution and a delegate to the League of Nations. His family experienced exile, having lived in Djibouti and Aden during the Italian occupation. It is likely that Gərmaččäw's father's experiences influenced the book's writing. In fact, Gərmaččäw and his father belonged to a milieu of advocates for progress and modernization in Ethiopia. Täklä Həwaryat was among the early abolitionists and progressive elites who joined forces to promote manumission and the abolition of slavery in the 1920s and 1930s: they freed their own slaves, established rehabilitation centres for manumitted children, and mobilized the community towards these goals. The story of the traveller and his commitment to abolition can be viewed as a fictionalized account reflecting the cause of an early generation of Ethiopian modernizers and abolitionists, like his father.¹⁹

Gərmaččäw's previous book, *Araya*, also illustrates his mode of writing, in which history is attempted by means of the fictionalized biography of Täklä Həwaryat, the author's father.²⁰ Many writers of the time adopted this style, taking history seriously while infusing it with fictional elements. Like many of his contemporaries of Həylä Šəllase I's regime, Gərmaččäw was a victim of the 1974 Ethiopian Revolution, which brought an end to the ancient regime and the Solomonic dynasty. The revolution, characterized by violence, affected the lives of individuals associated with both the old regime and the revolution itself. Many were imprisoned and killed, including officials, statesmen, and members

17 Yonas Ashine Demisse 2022.

18 Bahru Zewde 2002.

19 Ibid.

20 Gərmaččäw Täklä Həwaryat 1946/1947.

of the nobility. Gərmaččāw, being a statesman of the Ḥaylā Šəllase I government, was imprisoned during this tumultuous era. A witness of the summary justice, the violence, and terror of the revolution, Gərmaččāw wrote *Ali Habāši* in the context of counter-revolution and civil war.

Throughout the preface and various sections of the book, Gərmaččāw engages in reflections on history, slavery, human nature, and violence. Writing the book served as a platform for thought and a means to process the contextual violence of the time. In doing so, Gərmaččāw associates the prevalence of violence with the institution of slavery. He acknowledges that there were many rulers who attempted to eradicate slavery in Ethiopia, but laments that ‘regrettably slavery stayed long with us’.²¹ He shares the stories of the violence caused by slavery (*barənnāt*) and serfdom (*gäbbarənāt*), aiming to educate the new generation about the real suffering many endured. He believes the book can help understand how cruelty is driven by ignorance, chauvinism, and narcissism. Gərmaččāw also wonders what leads to such brutality in humans, suggesting that the fight for survival may be one credible cause. He concludes that ‘man’s ruthlessness and cruelty is profoundly visible in a society where slavery and *gäbbarənāt* were sustained for long.’²² He also shares his hope that as understanding and cooperation gradually unfold, the principles of social life will be guided by the rule of law instead of mere force, by solidarity instead of reciprocal violence, and by altruism rather than egoism.²³

According to Gərmaččāw three social conditions are at the root of violence: ignorance, chauvinism, and egoism. He argues that as long as these conditions persist, violence will endure. Considering the narrative role of the introduction, which revolves around slavery, violence, and the context of revolutionary terror, it is plausible to interpret the book as a critique of the revolutionary political violence unleashed in Ethiopia. Gərmaččāw portrays and explains this violence by drawing parallels with the violence inherent in the institution of slavery. He considers slavery as a practice that breeds violence in any society and boldly asserts that tendencies of cruelty and violence are prevalent in societies where slavery has persisted for extended periods.²⁴

21 Gərmaččāw *Täklä Ḥawaryat* 2007/2008, IV.

22 Ibid.

23 ‘This balance, which stems from nature and life, seems to come from a force that is not very strong but rather from a history of slavery and peasantry that has lasted for many years and societies that have lived through it. Be that as it may, the spirit of cooperation and collaboration that fosters agreement and mutual respect among people, rather than using force, using laws, and thinking only of oneself, will always remain a guiding principle in their lives’, *ibid.*, IV.

24 *Ibid.*, IV and 43.

Gərmaččāw explicitly refers to *Ali Habāši* as a ‘historical novel’ (i.e. *labb wällād tarik*, ልብ ወለድ ታሪክ);²⁵ however, the term *tarik*—history—is not contained in the title. By allowing history and fiction to intersect, he produces a work that may be seen considered an ethnographic site. The book reflects his own life experiences, encounters, reading, and many stories recounted orally by numerous individuals, mainly slaves, he had heard, whereby he skilfully employs narrative techniques in conveying his message. In Gərmaččāw’s works, the narrative is a manifestation of history and memory, taking the form of life stories. The literary imagination, narrative structure, and aesthetic power employed in the book enable readers to immerse themselves in a specific history of slavery, violence, manumission, and abolition in the Red Sea slave trade. However, set against the revolutionary backdrop of Ethiopia, the book can also be read as engaging with the political violence of the author’s immediate context. It can be argued that Gərmaččāw wrote *Ali Habāši* as a critique of revolutionary terror without directly addressing the revolution itself. Violence serves as the anchor in the book, with the intention of exposing the cruelty and violence associated with slavery. In the introduction, for example, Gərmaččāw acknowledges the enduring presence of slavery in Ethiopia despite ongoing efforts to abolish it, describing this ‘epoch of history’ as regrettable. His notion of history as epochs or chapters suggests an evolutionary perspective, and he believes that this prolonged epoch of slavery has made Ethiopia more violent. He appears to interpret the violence of his time through the lens of the long-term history of slavery and its associated violence.

Ethnography of the Domestic Slave Trade and Slavery

Ali Habāši seamlessly combines elements of a travel narrative, biography, and autobiography. It is initially narrated by a traveller who embarks on a journey across the Gulf of Aden for recreational purposes. During his travel in Aden, which is taken as a symbol for Arabia, he encounters Ali, a slave from Ethiopia, who shares his life story with him, recounting his enslavement during childhood in the southern part of Ethiopia. Ali describes his experiences under various masters along the extensive slave trade route to Arabia, which passes through the Red Sea. He also reveals his life as a eunuch in a harem and his eventual path to freedom, leading him to Aden, where he meets the traveller who serves as interlocutor, engaging in conversations about history, violence, and slavery. Ali, the main character, later takes on the role of narrator, while the traveller, at times, assumes the narrative voice in the book.

Through Ali’s life story, Gərmaččāw unveils the geographical breadth of the slave trade in the Red Sea world. People were enslaved and castrated in the

25 Ibid., IV.

western hinterland of the Red Sea region, whereas their destination would be in the eastern part. Ali's life journey lies at the heart of the fictional narrative and is interwoven with the experiences of numerous slaves who were raided or abducted from different parts of Ethiopia. Gərmaččāw takes readers from Addis Abāba to Aden, back to Maḡi in southern Ethiopia, and then into Arabia, following the journey of Ali and other slaves who crossed into Arabia. The book also portrays the lives of female slaves in the long-distance trade across the Red Sea via the story of Bāyānā, Ali's sister. Furthermore, by introducing a missionary who travelled from Tanzania, Gərmaččāw connects the broader history of slavery in East Africa to the Red Sea region.

Although the traveller encounters the freed Ali in Aden, it becomes evident that Ali has been deeply traumatized by his tragic experiences as a slave in Ethiopia and Arabia. He reunites with his sister in his master's harem but loses her in the Arabian desert when the two flee after having stolen their master's riches. Ali recounts their enslavement and their separation in an Ethiopian slave market. Despite his later freedom, wealth, and popularity in Aden, Ali's traumatic experiences, social dislocation, and inherent alienation leave him profoundly unhappy.²⁶ The riches he stole from his master does nothing to alleviate the trauma he has endured throughout his life. Eventually, Ali takes his own life, leaving all his wealth to the traveller who becomes the central character for the remainder of the book. The second part of the book portrays how the traveller uses this wealth to initiate emancipation and abolition movements in Maḡi and later in Addis Abāba. The book concludes by linking this abolition movement to the historical Fəqərənna Agālgəlot Maḡbār ('Love and Service Association').²⁷

Through Ali's life story, Gərmaččāw portrays the painful experience of Ali's gradual transformation from a boy into a eunuch while in a household:

One day the owner of the house (slave owner) pulled my trousers down and begun to rub my body. I was stressed and shy. She continued to rub and press my testicles saying, 'Nothing will happen to you.' When I told her it is painful, she stops for a while and continues to press and rub. She did this every evening, and my testicles gradually shrunk.²⁸

The regular pressing of his testicles must have crushed the testicles and significantly affected their biological function. This was one of the methods used for castration without amputation of testicles, scrotum, or genitals.²⁹

Ali begins his account by describing Maḡi, a region in southern Ethiopia in the post-1920s, when slave raids were illegal but the trade in slaves was a preva-

26 See Patterson 1982, 13 for *alienation* as one of the defining element of slave subject.

27 Garretson 2017.

28 Gərmaččāw Tāklā Hawaryat 2007/2008, 29.

29 Kuefler 2001, 33–34.

lent clandestine business. He vividly portrays the landscape, forests, wildlife, and the ways of life in the region. His natal name was Bonikso. His people gained their livelihood from farming, raising domestic animals, fishing, and hunting.³⁰ Ali also acknowledged the challenges faced, such as droughts and diseases. Their livelihoods were also threatened by the presence of *šəfta* (bandits) who ambushed villagers during raids. The book vividly depicts the terror caused by the threat of slavery.

Above all it is *šəfta* who frighten the people. These armed groups who raid villages, kill those who run away and enslave children and healthy adults. It is difficult to explain the cruelty and brutality of the slave raiders.³¹ [...] We were helping our grandparents to prepare food when the slave raiders invaded our village. They were singing and shooting using firearms. My grandfather killed two of them using his spear and was shot dead. The slave raiders burned the village and all of us exited our huts and fell into the hands of raiders.³²

From the moment of his capture into slavery, Ali recounts his experiences until he reaches Arabia. He observes numerous people enslaved by other *šəfta* after leaving their villages, with many of the *šəfta* being Arabs who were key actors of the transnational slave trade in the Red Sea region.

Ali describes the journey from Maḡi to Addis Abāba which could only be undertaken under cover of night, with daytime spent confined in a locked room. He vividly portrays the difficulties of travelling from Maḡi northward, narrating the heartbreaking loss of his grandmother, who was unable to continue after three days on the road. The killing of disobedient or exhausted slaves, as well as the use of torture as a disciplinary measure, gave a second layer of violence to the enslavement process. The suffering of long-distance travel and hunger is poignantly depicted in the book.

After days of travel, Ali and the other slaves arrive in Addis Abāba, where they are locked in a room and visited by potential buyers. Ali recounts the heartbreaking moment when he is separated from his sister Bāyānā, who is the first to be sold. He states that the buyers are both Christians and Muslims. Ali and a few others remain in the custody of the slave trader, spending two years working for him.

Gərmaččāw's historical knowledge enables him to narrate, through the voice of Ali, the different passages of the slave trade in Ethiopia. Ali narrates how an elderly former slave describes the trafficking of slaves along various trade routes. Slaves captured in western Ethiopia, particularly from Wällāga and

30 Gərmaččāw Tāklä Ḥawaryat 2007/2008, 11.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid., 13.

Illubabor, were taken through Amäya, Horo Guduru, Gəndä Bärät, and Mäčča to Addis Abäba. Alternatively, they could be transported to Goğğam after Mäčča or to Märhabete and Ğimma, leading to Wällo and Təgray. Those captured around Ğimma and Käfa would be taken to Gurage, crossing the Gibe River en route to Addis Abäba. Slaves destined for Arabia would be taken from Addis Abäba to Aləyyu Amba and Čänno, prominent slave market centres. From there, they would be transported to the 'Afar region and then to the Red Sea coast. Some slaves were also sold in Dangila, another slave market, as well as Mätäma, Kärän, and Massawa, for those destined for the north. Many individuals captured from Sidama, Wälaytta, Gamo-Gofa, Kāmbata, Kullo-Konta, Maği, Gimira, Käfa, or Limmu would be taken north or to the north-eastern coast of Ethiopia.³³ There were also slaves sold to Arsi, Bale, and Harär in the east, which were known historical slave trade routes.³⁴ Through the life stories of other slaves Ali encounters, Gərmaččāw captures the various slave markets and modes of trafficking slaves out of Ethiopia.

Gərmaččāw also provides glimpses into the inner workings of households where slaves and other servile individuals lived. In addition to the *barya* (slave), he mentions other forms such as *aškär* (paid servants) and *gäräd* (female paid house-help). For example, Ali himself seizes an opportunity to escape and becomes a servant in a household, helping a lady in Addis Abäba. This lady, after listening to Ali's gruesome experiences, promised to help him as long as Ali helps with her daily chores. However, she breaks her promise and sells him to an Arab after transforming him into a eunuch by rubbing his testicles every other day gradually rendering him sexually impotent. Ali asked her why she was doing this, and the lady replied, 'This is better than amputation'.³⁵ Ali however eventually faced physical castration (amputation) in another household along the trade route to the Red Sea and the Arabia.

Ali also narrates the story of an old man who became a slave, remained as a domestic slave and eventually escaped to become a free servant, *lole*,³⁶ a term that refers to a person bonded to a master, offering labour services in exchange for being hosted in the household. The master is called *asadari* (host), while the bonded person is called *lole*. The old man states, 'I decided to be *lole* to someone'.³⁷

The traveller notes *aškärs*, or paid servants, exist in many households he visited, particularly in Addis Abäba and Maği. Ali recalls being welcomed by an *aškär* at the gate and encountering another one in the living room of an urban

33 Ibid., 36–37.

34 Abdussamad H. Ahmad 1999.

35 Gərmaččāw Täklä Hawaryat 2007/2008, 30.

36 Ibid., 38.

37 Ibid.

household, that very probably hosted many *aškärs* following the abolition of slavery.³⁸

These different forms of servile relations reflect the depth of social hierarchy in Ethiopian society, where slavery and freedom were only two extreme points on a spectrum that also included other forms of asymmetrical relations, such as that between chiefs and subjects, patrons and clients, husbands and wives, parents and children. Still, slavery presents specific aspects: it begins with the enslaving of human beings through theft, raids, or invasions of communities, followed by transportation, sale, and purchase in non-native communities or regions. For example, *Gərmaččäw*'s characters meet in Arabia after being enslaved in different parts of Ethiopia, from Maği to Gondär. They have all been alienated from their communities and destined for Arabia.

Anti-Slavery and Manumission as Social Ideals

In Arabia, Ali is sold to a member of the local elite and serves in a harem, where he experiences extreme loneliness and yearns for his hometown. Over time, he learns to adapt to Arab culture and language and becomes well-respected in the household. It is within this harem that Ali has a dramatic encounter with his sister who had been sold to Ali's master under the name of *Ḥalīma*. Ali recounts the experiences of his sister, echoing the stories of many other slaves.

The reunion sparks hope in the siblings, leading them to plan their escape. Unfortunately, *Ḥalīma* (*Bäyänä*) dies during their journey through the desert towards Aden. Ali eventually finds freedom in Aden, when he actually meets the traveller. Upon sharing his life story and those of many other slaves, Ali takes his own life. He leaves his entire wealth to the traveller, who sees it as a responsibility entrusted to him by God and dedicates himself to the cause of abolition, freedom, and human rights.³⁹ Inspired by Ali, the traveller returns to Addis Abäba and Maği with a mission of abolition and manumission.

Gərmaččäw's book also serves as a fictional representation of the *Fəqərənna Agälgəlot Maḥbär* ('Love and Service Association') established by *Ḥakim Wär-qənäh* in Addis Abäba.⁴⁰ However, in the novel, the location of the association and the establishment of a school for freed slaves are specifically set in Maği, one of the regions most affected by slavery in Ethiopia. The idea and financing of the manumission project are associated with Ali himself. The main character, who originally listened to and narrated the life stories of the slaves as told by Ali, now, becomes an agent who advocates for and establishes manumission efforts in Ethiopia, particularly in Maği. The school is named Bonikso, after

38 Ibid., 270.

39 Ibid., 145–146.

40 Garretson 2017.

Ali's original name, and Bāyānā, after Ali's sister. The traveller describes the mission as follows:

I decided to establish a school and a clinic on behalf of Ali (Bonikso) and his sister (Bāyānā) in Maḡi. This not only in memory of Ali and his sister but also as a remembrance site for all unfortunate victims of slavery, and at the same time the people in the country will benefit from the school and clinic.⁴¹

The traveller strongly believes that education is the key to freedom and equality, echoing the views of the first generation of Ethiopian scholars who saw modernization as essential for abolishing slavery and other forms of subjugation, including the *gābbar* system. He asserts, 'It is only when education expands, and the rule of law is established that freedom and rights are protected.'⁴²

The traveller preaches the discourse of abolition and national sovereignty in Maḡi, echoing the early 1920s abolitionist movement. The establishment of the school and clinic in Maḡi aims to educate the poor and the victims of slavery, reminiscent of the Love and Service Association, which opened schools for children freed from slavery. Gərmaččāw depicts the formation of pro-abolition progressive Ethiopian elites and the challenges they faced. Both men and women actively participate in the project, with some even granting land for the school. However, reminding the resistance faced by the Love and Service Association from the slave-owning elite, the traveller encounters opposition from the local community in Maḡi. He strives to generate support from both the elite and ordinary individuals, facing various challenges in his efforts to establish the school and clinic. The final section of the book narrates the struggle to realize these projects in Maḡi, using historical information about the Love and Service Association and conflating them into the novel. The book concludes with the traveller stating his plan to establish an association dedicated to ending the slave trade and the use of slave labour in Ethiopia.⁴³

Reading Slavery in a Novel: A Conclusion

Ali Habāši weaves together the lives of enslaved individuals and abolitionists. The book unfolds as a dialogue between Ali, a eunuch recounting his capture and life in a harem, and an unnamed traveller reflecting on history, violence, and slavery. The traveller questions whether violence is innate or shaped by society, arguing that prolonged slavery fosters brutality and erodes empathy.

41 Gərmaččāw *Täklä Hawaryat* 2007/2008, 153.

42 Ibid., 194.

43 Ibid., 309.

The book narrates a gradualist view of abolition, acknowledging that even though anti-slavery laws were enacted, the practice remained widespread in the country.⁴⁴ This gradual approach is also driven by concerns about national sovereignty, as the traveller fears that widespread slavery could provide a pretext for foreign invasion. Gərmaččāw depicts abolitionist sentiments and the Love and Service Association being born from conversations between former slaves and the traveller in Aden, presenting Maği as the birthplace of the abolition movement. In this way, he underlined the agency of slaves and former slaves in the ideas of abolition in Ethiopia.

An advocate for progress and civilization, Gərmaččāw concludes that freedom, respect, education, and civilization are imperative for mitigating brutality and violence. He underscores the significance of education and a progressive mindset in shaping societal norms and achieving better governance. Gərmaččāw contends that history adheres to natural laws, suggesting that societies can evolve towards democratic governance and adherence to the rule of law.

The book depicts slavery as a dehumanizing system that impacts both masters and slaves, albeit in very different forms, stifling their ability to coexist peacefully. The interlocutor engages in contemplation and theorization about slavery, violence, justice, victimization, and the essence of humanity within the societal structures that perpetuate violence.

Gərmaččāw refrains from blaming Arab traders for the institution of slavery in Ethiopia and avoids racial or ethnic characterization of the practice. He never defines the slave trade as primarily Islamic or Arab-driven, contrary to a common discursive practice in the scholarship and in British abolitionist discourse.⁴⁵ Instead, he presents the slave trade as a transnational phenomenon involving various local actors across the region, rather than attributing it solely to a particular culture or religion. Gərmaččāw's focus is not on racializing or ethnizing the practice of slavery.

Instead, the book underscores the transnational scope of the slave trade, highlighting the significant role played by local actors from the communities where individuals had been enslaved. The trade and transportation of slaves spanned a vast geographic expanse, stretching from Zanzibar to southern Ethiopia to the western and eastern shores of the Red Sea and beyond. While acknowledging the involvement of Muslim merchants known as *ğābārti*, their contribution has not been singled out as the primary driving force behind the slave trade. Gərmaččāw acknowledges the intricate historical conditions that precipitated the enslavement of individuals.

Writing against the backdrop of acute collective violence in Ethiopia, Gərmaččāw directs attention to the broader issue of violence and its underlying

44 Ibid., 195.

45 McDougall 2002.

causes. The historiographical significance of creative literary works such as *Ali Habāši* lies primarily in their ability to reconstruct the life histories of slaves. Despite being filtered through the author's imagination, *Ali Habāši* vividly portrays aspects of the everyday lives of enslaved individuals, depicting experiences ranging from slave raids, transportation, castration, and the cycle of being bought and sold, to enduring alienation and violence within the transnational spaces of the Indian Ocean world or the Red Sea region. Moreover, as Serena Tolino argues with reference to the Egyptian case, the absence of ego-texts by slaves makes it necessary to include other sources in our historical analysis, such as memoirs of elite members, or literary works like *Ali Habāši*. Those can contribute to constructing a nuanced understanding of slavery in transnational spaces such as the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean world.⁴⁶

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46 Tolino 2023.

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Afterword: Reconceptualizing Slavery Within and Beyond Ethiopian History

BENEDETTA ROSSI

Covering a period from the fifteenth century to the present (though focused primarily on the nineteenth and twentieth century), taking multiple disciplinary approaches, and bringing together fourteen international scholars, six of whom are Ethiopian and Ethiopia-based, this Supplement makes an important contribution not only to the history of slavery in what today is Ethiopia, but also to studies of slavery in African and global history. Its articles cover a vast geographic area and examine how slavery functioned in different religions (Christianity, Islam and African religions) and across a variety of political systems, some more centralized, others decentralized, or lineage based. It shows that slavery was present everywhere in the region, though slave status appears to have been more internally diversified and stratified in kingdoms and empire-like formations where one group dominated other vassal groups and extracted tributes from them.¹ In this Afterword, I will briefly discuss the ways in which this Supplement contributes to specialist studies of slavery in Ethiopia, as well as the new questions it opens up. I will then consider how it contributes to broader debates within the global history of slavery.

The Supplement shows that slavery was never static: it corresponded to multiple types of social relations that varied from society to society and changed over time. The Introduction refers to the notion of ‘trajectories’ as a framework for the analysis of different forms of slavery that acquired new meanings, and muted into new phenomena as abolition progressively took effect throughout the twentieth century. All these various forms of slavery were oppressive, but not in the same way and to the same degree.² It mentions royal or public slaves, including eunuchs and enslaved persons who served in the military;³ persons enslaved

- 1 For a discussion of centralization and decentralization as factors in African slave systems, see Klein 2001; Lovejoy 2018; Rossi 2021d.
- 2 I used the notion of ‘trajectories of slavery’ to investigate multiple forms of slavery and their reconfigurations in West Africa (Rossi 2016). Serena Tolino and her collaborators in the TraSIS project (Swiss National Science Foundation funded project ‘TraSIS: Trajectories of Slavery in Islamicate Societies: Three Concepts from Islamic Legal Sources’, based at the University of Bern) are now adopting this concept to interrogate the specific status of particular Islamic institutions that are connected to slavery but have distinctive characteristics that warrant separate analysis.
- 3 For a broad comparative study of public slaves in world history, see the special issue edited by Franco Luciani (Luciani 2021).

in state churches and other religious institutions; domestic slaves; and slave labour in plantations. Even war captives did not all receive the same treatment: they could have been integrated into prestigious military units, or used to pay tribute in slaves, or compelled to become chattel slaves and sold in the slave trade. Given the diversity of their circumstances, enslaved persons experienced slavery in multiple ways across the multi-cultural and legally plural Ethiopian space. Contributors analyse distinct forms of, and perspectives on, slavery in Ethiopia. A unified ‘Ethiopian position’ on slavery’s meanings never existed, nor did a single moral evaluation ever emerge. This was true throughout the entire period focused upon here but acquired particular significance from the 1880s to the 1940s, when the condition for Ethiopia’s national independence was her rulers’ ability to convince imperialist European governments that slavery had been effectively repressed everywhere in the country. Exposure to multiple international discourses on slavery intensified internal debates on how this institution should be approached, as articles by Giulia Bonacci, Sara Marzagora, and Yonas Ashine in this Supplement demonstrate.

The growth of a hegemonic global abolitionist discourse connected to European imperialism in the last quarter of the nineteenth century confronted African rulers with an antislavery ideology that could be, and indeed was, used against them. The semantic narrowing of the meaning of ‘slavery’ in international law coincided with its de-legalization.⁴ These global transformations had repercussions in African localities where various local ethics of slavery had heretofore governed relations between enslaved and free-status persons. New standards were imposed at an international level and African polities were expected to meet these standards or face stiff criticism, diplomatic pressure, threats, and eventually colonial occupation. Local engagement with global dynamics propelled debates over pre-existing ideas and mores. Yonas examined semantic shifts in the idea of ‘slavery’ in Ethiopian/Amharic culture over the *longue durée*.⁵ Takele Merid and Alexander Meckelburg reconstructed how successive Ethiopian rulers changed Ethiopian laws as independent suzerains progressively more invested in global abolitionism.⁶ In spite of Ethiopian reforms, Fascist Italy used slavery as a pretext to occupy Ethiopia. Meanwhile, new ways of thinking about, and dealing with, slavery had taken shape among Ethiopian intellectuals and working classes, including the previously enslaved. Although the views of those enslaved and their positions are less accessible as they left no substantial written records, the political history of twentieth-century Ethiopia attests to profound resentment engendered by centuries of oppression in rigid

4 On the semantic transformations occasioned by the development of global abolitionism and a periodization of this process in different stages, see Rossi 2021b, 984–986; Rossi 2023.

5 Yonas Ashine Demisse 2022 and 2024.

6 Takele Merid and Meckelburg 2024.

social hierarchies that justified slavery and were only dismantled by the revolution.

The historiography of the revolution, ‘Red Terror’, and *Därg* regime has generally denied that these events were the expression of ‘irreconcilable ideological differences’ between those who ‘freed the peasantry from its feudal fetters’ and reactionary counter-revolutionary forces.⁷ To date, studies focused on the cultural roots of the revolution tend to concentrate on cohesive movements, like elite intellectuals or the student movement, and the revolutionary fronts that emerged from these movements.⁸ Those at the bottom of the inter-ethnic social ladders that compose Ethiopian society do not appear to have developed unified political views and actions. Given the internal diversity in the statuses and conditions of the enslaved and of other subordinate groups whose lives were scarcely better than those of slaves, it is hardly surprising that they did not display a class consciousness. And yet, this Supplement’s clear opening statement that slavery and the slave trade had ‘undeniable significance’ in Ethiopian history up until recent times raises the question of how persons of slave descent experienced, and contributed to, the political regime put in place by the *Därg*. This specific question has never been explored in detail. But if slavery did indeed play a major role in Ethiopian society, then its pertinence is undeniable: what are the connections, if any, between the ‘end of slavery’ and the rise of revolution?

Kefyalew Tessema Semu’s, Takele Merid’s, and Desalegn Amsalu’s articles in this Supplement suggest that people make a link between the revolution and the end of slavery. Their interviewees in south-eastern and western Ethiopia have living memories of slave raids targeting their communities and argue that this state of affairs ended only in 1974, when the revolutionary regime began. What happened in their localities? What did the *Därg* regime mean, in theory and practice, to those who had been considered ‘enslavable’ and were still collectively classified as ‘slaves’ in public culture? Was the revolution a crucial moment when certain groups were no longer being raided, kidnapped, and turned into ‘slaves’ (or corresponding terms in local languages)? The ‘trajectories of slavery’ approach proposes a conceptual framework for the study of such dynamics. Were the descendants of the formerly enslaved still classified as ‘slaves’, even though they had become autonomous from their former enslavers (classificatory slavery)? What, if any, were the practical consequences of such labelling? For whom did actual or presumed slave descent cease to be discernible after legal emancipation? For whom, conversely, did it lead to stigma, discrimination, oppression, exploitation, and exclusion, and how did these recon-

7 The cited passages are from Gebru Tareke 2008, 186, 187. Gebru critically reviews some of this literature, which is broad. ‘Classic’ studies include Markakis and Nega Ayele 1978 and Clapham 1988.

8 For example, Bahru Zewde 2002; Elleni Centime Zeleke 2019.

figurations of slavery differ from place to place and case to case? To use Roger Botte's term, did slavery undergo a process of 'metamorphosis' into different institutions and relationships, and, if so, to what extent were these coercive?⁹ Desalegn's article suggests that 'slavery' became a powerful trope in the political struggles that followed the abolition of slavery. It would be valuable to establish where the transition to post-slavery¹⁰ was precipitated by the 1974 Revolution. It is possible that in some places this transition coincided with the revolution, while in others it occurred earlier, but at present this is mere speculation. Answering these questions would require further research, which has yet to be undertaken.

The prospect of new research necessitates the development of a methodological apparatus with the potential to yield meaningful answers. This calls for a reflection on analytical concepts, a reflection that is particularly important given that some of the global-historical contributions cited in the Introduction have argued that the concept of 'slavery' is potentially misleading and should be replaced with other notions. In particular, the Supplement's explicit engagement with the 'asymmetrical dependency' approach gives rise to questions regarding the analytical utility of the term 'slavery' and its associated terms, including 'slave', 'enslaved', 'enslaver', 'slave-descendant', and others. Are these meaningful and heuristically productive analytical categories? Some scholars who have criticized the slavery–freedom binary have proposed that we should think, instead, in terms of gradations of unfreedom, coercion, oppression, and exploitation.¹¹ These arguments require further examination. Contributions to this Supplement can inform our consideration of the relevance of the term 'slavery' for making sense of distinct forms of slavery that have undergone disparate processes of change and, in some cases, have become metaphors for other types of exploitation.

To be sure, that the slavery–freedom binary is not appropriate to all places and times is not a new idea. Already in the mid-1960s one of the foremost students of slavery in the Graeco-Roman world stated that societies change from structures in which status runs along a continuum of rights in persons to structures in which statuses are polarized around the slave and free poles, and back again, with no teleological or deterministic logics at work.¹² More recently, perceptions of some historical forms of slavery (for example, Atlantic or Graeco-Roman slavery) as paradigmatic have been challenged. Miriam Cottias, Elisabeth Cunin and Antonio de Almeida Mendes advanced that researchers ought

9 Botte 2005.

10 Hahonou and Lecocq 2015; Lecocq and Pelckmans 2023.

11 For example, Eltis and Engerman 2011, 3; Steinfeld 2001; Van der Linden 2014.

12 Finley 1964, 249.

to think of ‘slaveries’ and ‘slave trades’ in the plural.¹³ Other historians went further and questioned the usefulness of the very term ‘slavery’. Joseph Miller rejected the idea of slavery as an institution and of the slave–master dyad as the historical epitome of domination worldwide and suggested that we think of each historical slaving process as singular and unique.¹⁴ Julia Winnebeck, Ove Sutter, Adrian Hermann, Christoph Antweiler, and Stephan Conermann pointed out that even the mere fact of writing in a particular language mobilizes a constellation of culture-specific meanings and connotations that make both comparison and translation difficult. They introduced the concept of ‘asymmetrical dependencies’ to focus on gradations and replace the slavery–freedom binary, which they see as ‘ideologically charged’ and ‘principally invok[ing] the notion of Atlantic or Graeco-Roman chattel slavery’ but not appropriate outside these contexts.¹⁵ This echoes Marcel Van der Linden’s earlier caveat that ‘to advance the academic debate, it would seem advisable not to remain focused on discussions about general, but inevitably contentious, terms such as “slavery”, but to go beyond that and to analyse as precisely as possible all forms of coerced labor—of which “slavery” is one example.’¹⁶

As a labour historian, Van der Linden is interested in slavery specifically as a form of labour among multiple different types of labour relations across societies and periods. He introduced a three-stage comparative method that ‘dissects’ coercive labour relations in the three moments of ‘entry’ (into a labour relation), ‘extraction’ (of work during the labour relation), and ‘exit’ (out of a labour relation). This is undoubtedly a powerful analytical device for comparing different forms of work in terms of the distinct moments when coercion is exercised in a relation (its beginning, its unfolding, its end). But, as I have argued elsewhere, slavery ‘is not—not only—one form of labour. What is distinctive of slavery, as opposed to other forms of unfree labour, is that it transfers to slaveowners poten-

13 Cottias, Cunin, and de Almeida Mendes 2016. This argument has been addressed and expanded upon in recent studies examining the phenomenon of slavery in Africa, see Balarin and Boyer-Rossol 2024.

14 ‘Contextualizing [the] master-slave dyad forces us to abandon the very notion of slavery as an institution’, Miller 2012, 19.

15 Winnebeck et al. 2023; they further argue that ‘[m]oving away from “slavery” as the central analytical and comparative concept for relations of asymmetrical dependency is part of a wider attempt to avoid existing “nostro-centrisms”, that is, merely projecting findings about well-known (often Western) examples onto comparable phenomena in other social orders. This raises the question, however, how to analyse and compare the findings of individual projects if “slavery” is no longer to be used as *tertium comparationis*’ (ibid., 29). See also the special issue edited by Jutta Wimmeler and Pia Wiegink, which applies and expands the theoretical considerations of Winnebeck et al. 2023; Wimmeler and Wiegink 2024.

16 Van der Linden 2014, 294.

tially permanent control over all of the enslaved person's attributes, entitlements, and productive and reproductive capabilities, not only his/her work.¹⁷ Although slavery and coerced labour should be kept distinct, it is both possible and productive to apply Van der Linden's approach to compare different types of slavery, or to compare slavery to other coercive relations.¹⁸

Being mindful of the limitations of the concept 'slavery' (in English) does not necessarily imply that this concept cannot be used for comparative purposes, or indeed for studies of 'slavery' as experienced by persons speaking different languages. Many comparative studies of slavery retain the term 'slavery' (while acknowledging its limitations) because they find that it effectively characterizes a phenomenon that existed in multiple locations and changed over time. In contrast, broader notions such as 'coercive labour' or 'asymmetrical dependency' are too vague.¹⁹ And yet, the above mentioned critiques of 'slavery' should be addressed. To do so, let us return to the initial question and formulate it as clearly as possible (if possibly somewhat bluntly): should we see 'slavery–freedom' as a Euro-American folk theory of inequality? There is no doubt that it played an instrumental role in the history of Western imperialism. Is it, therefore, methodologically preferable to reject 'slavery' as an analytical concept? Or is it more heuristically productive to keep using it critically to examine the multiple forms that slavery took historically and the many ways in which the idea of slavery was mobilized and weaponized in different localities by specific actors?

Let us begin by examining the possible justifications for avoiding the term 'slavery' in the context of African and Ethiopian history. In the second half of the nineteenth century British and European state-sponsored abolitionism focused on eradicating a specific model of extreme coercion that had operated across the Atlantic in the previous four hundred years. Pressures from abolitionist movements at least since the eighteenth century had led European empires, and primarily the British empire, to redefine the meanings of 'slavery'. Once this redefined concept of slavery had been abolished within their own jurisdictions, they proceeded to condemn the existence of slavery in other countries and societies. They then arrogated to themselves a mission to abolish 'slavery' worldwide and used it to justify colonial expansionism and the violence that accompanied it.²⁰ As Europe's empires occupied new territories, they introduced

17 Rossi 2021a, 731.

18 For a collective comparative volume doing just this, see Pargas and Schiel 2023.

19 See for example Ismard 2017; Ismard, Rossi, and Vidal 2021; Lenski 2018; and classic studies such as those of Orlando Patterson (2018; and, for a criticism of Patterson's definition of slavery, see Rossi 2021c. For intra-Africa comparisons, see Meillassoux 1975. As is well known, Igor Kopytoff and Suzanne Miers chose to put 'slavery' in brackets throughout their entire Africa focused volume (1977). More generally, see Davis 2000.

20 For examples of these processes as they unfolded in particular contexts, see Lydon 2021; Rossi 2024.

new forms of coercion (such as indentured labour and colonial forced labour) and declared them legitimate in contrast to 'slavery', which had to be vigorously eradicated. The self-serving colonial tendency to declare what European administrators called 'slavery' illegal, and all the other forms of coercion they introduced 'legal' because they involved 'free' (non-slave) subjects, served to reinforce the image of a stark slavery–freedom binary. When the League of Nations put pressure on colonial empires to apply their own laws in their newly occupied colonies, they intensified their antislavery measures, but also re-labelled many local forms of resilient slavery 'voluntary servitude' and euphemized them because they were unable or unwilling to actually suppress slavery in the colonies, now that it was their responsibility to do so.

Surely, this account is oversimplified; however, as a generalization, it is not inaccurate. If we pursue this line of reasoning, we may conclude that post-abolition 'slavery' was a construct that originated in Western political culture and served the imperialist ambitions of Euro-America. Some may contend that the notion of the exceptional coercive potential of 'slavery', too, is but a product of this 'Western' discourse and that there is no inherent distinction between slavery and other forms of coercive institutions. But is this the case? Is it the case that in light of the 'Western' political instrumentalization of the idea of slavery, this term is now so charged and controversial that researchers would do better to think of 'slavery' as a category of practice rather than an analytical category... an *explanandum* rather than an *explanans*?²¹ One of the problems with these considerations is that 'the West', 'the North', 'Euro-America', 'Europe', or 'European empires' are not meaningful subjects of historical action. Positions were more diverse, within both colonizing and colonized societies. Localized processes were driven by the struggles of specific individuals and groups. These might have included Ethiopians inspired by ideas that they encountered in far-away places; or Americans inspired by what they saw in Ethiopia; or Europeans committed to a self-arrogated 'mission to civilize'. Once our analysis moves beyond initial generalizations, as it must, 'slavery' has no absolute, objective meaning; its uses change from actor to actor. This impasse is not resolved by replacing 'slavery' with less specific terms. In all cases, and with all terms, historians must explain what the authors of their sources meant by mobilizing certain words, literally or metaphorically, in their own or other languages, to pursue projects that can only be understood in context.

There always have been different rationales of slavery. And yet, not only historians, but also the subjects of their studies, have been reflecting critically on such differences. This Supplement's contributions talk to these questions. In particular, they allow us to reflect on two separate issues: first, the issue of the

21 The distinction between 'analytical category' and 'category of practice' is from Cooper and Brubaker 2005.

existence of different ‘folk theories’, or rationales, of ‘slavery’ at work in different societies (which presumably makes it difficult to carry a concept so heavily laden with normative connotations across contexts); and second, the issue of the usefulness of ‘slavery’ as an analytical concept. The three articles by Bonacci, Marzagora and Yonas are directly relevant to the first question. They expose interactions between groups who had different understandings of slavery. Bonacci shows that the pan-Africanist intellectuals Joel A. Rogers and William E. Steen, while critical of slavery in Ethiopia, wanted to distance themselves from the uses European imperialists made of abolitionism. They did not think slavery was an illusion—they hardly could, given their background and engagement with debates about slavery and race in North America. Marzagora analyses Käbbädä Mika’el’s view that Ethiopia was not substantially different from other European civilizations when it came to making efforts to eradicate slavery; he too did not deny that slavery existed and that its effective abolition was desirable, but criticized Fascist Italy and other European powers for using slavery as a pretext to invade a sovereign country that was making independent efforts to suppress it. And Yonas discusses the use of fiction by Ethiopian intellectuals to promote antislavery sentiments in the broader public. Clearly, while Europe’s imperialist states were able to impose a discourse of slavery (and anti-slavery) that they used for their own expansionist purposes, actors were never locked in untranslatable worlds of knowledge. They thought reflectively and self-reflectively about different meanings and practices of slavery; they compared their perceptions of slavery with those of others; and they negotiated both over actions and over meanings. They understood where they differed and engaged in struggles over interpretations of ‘slavery’. They used the same term—ideologically charged, confusing, contested—to develop different strategies.

In terms of the second question (the usefulness of ‘slavery’ as an analytical concept), throughout this Supplement ‘slavery’ appears both as a tool for political rhetoric and to denote particular social relations that differed from place to place but shared much in common. Indeed, so much was shared by different ‘slaveries’ that persons who had the misfortune of being enslaved and resold multiple times across many different societies and cultures were rarely confused about their status: they knew when they continued to be ‘slaves’ even though they changed hands and cultures; and they generally understood when they were manumitted or liberated, as the case may be. Those who handled enslaved persons also treated them differently from other free dependents. Admasu Abebe’s article on the *keela* gate system of the Dawuro kingdom shows that tax was not collected from anyone who occupied weaker roles in ‘asymmetrical dependencies’—it was collected on traded slaves; and purification rituals were not performed for all ‘dependents’—they were performed when slaves were let into the kingdom. This is because the particular forms of othering that made certain groups enslavable were not the same for all non-slave dependents, including systematically oppressed, coerced, and exploited groups in Dawuro society.

Takele and Desalegn's articles reveal living memories of being raided as slaves in western Ethiopia. They refer to autobiographic testimonies of persons who had themselves been captured and abducted; or whose parents lived through times when tributes in slaves were paid to local rulers and warlords. Their knowledge of their past is marked by a history of collective exposure to slave raids and the slave trade and forced subjection to warlords who classified them as enslavable based on exonyms that they see as derogatory. The stigma and exclusion they continue to suffer from is, in their eyes, tied to slavery as a specific institution that racializes the enslavable 'other' to justify treatment that would be unjustifiable for all other (non-enslavable) categories of persons. The articles by Kefyalew and Sophie Küspert-Rakotondrainy highlight the complexity of these circumstances. Doubtlessly, collective memory is not a simple window onto the past; it often says less about what actually happened than about present-day political struggles. It may be impossible to confirm whether specific groups and individuals who suffer from the stigma of classificatory slavery descend from parents, grandparents, or ancestors who had actually been enslaved. But the fact that slavery should be such a powerful metaphor is not random, as suggested by independent sources attesting to rampant slaving in the region against particular groups. It is not by chance that discrimination takes the form of classificatory slavery—a point also made very clearly by Desalegn's article on how 'slavery' featured in the political claims of different groups in 1991, 2005, and 2018. In these contexts, the notion of 'asymmetric dependency' may allow researchers to compare the nature of dependency rooted in slavery with that of dependency rooted in other forms of coercive relations. But, in my view, it complements rather than replaces frameworks developed specifically to study slavery in its multiple manifestations and historical transformations.

Research on slavery needs fine-tuned concepts, and there is a long history of historiographic debates over which concepts are best suited to make sense of slavery's multiple historical instantiations. For example, Patterson criticized the stress on modes of production (advocated, amongst others, by Paul Lovejoy) for its 'narrow materialistic focus', and he suggested that we think about 'modes of articulation'. Indeed, the kind of religious logics that are discussed in David B. Spielman's article are not amenable to analysis within the framework of modes of production. Patterson's concept allows for the articulation of religious ethics and economic rationales to be productively examined.²² Noel Lenski suggested more specific criteria for comparing historical slaveries in terms of relative benefits to slaveholders and disadvantages to slaves. He introduced the idea of 'vectors of intensification' to measure the intensity of exploitation. He compared slave-master relations by weighing benefits to masters (use and exchange value of slaves as commodity, use and exchange value of slave labour and labour

22 Patterson 2000.

product) against disadvantages to enslaved persons (relative permanence of the slave condition, level of violent domination, degree of natal alienation, and dishonour). Patterson's and Lenski's analytical frameworks are just examples of debates developed within slavery studies. They insist on the specificity of slavery as a distinct institution that opposes the free and the enslaved across time and space. Similarly, the 'trajectories of slavery' framework was developed to facilitate research not only on transformations within slavery,²³ or on comparisons between different 'slaveries'; it was developed also to enable the reconstruction of circumstances where some types of slavery turned into new types of oppressive relations and the memory of past slavery continued to cast a shadow on people who actually or allegedly descended from enslaved ancestors.

In all of this, Lacy Noel Feigh is correct in noting that researchers who aim to study slavery as a practice and a relation should not necessarily expect to find it explicitly named as such in their sources. The term has frequently been omitted from written and oral texts, and only through meticulous examination can the reality of slavery be discerned where it is silenced. In order to achieve this, it is necessary to have an understanding of what is distinctive about it. Therefore, slavery may be a relevant category of analysis when it is absent as a category of practice. Conversely, the discursive deployment of the term 'slavery' can be metaphorical and instrumental. The term 'slavery' is sometimes employed in sources to emphasize the extreme harshness of exploitative relations that historians would not analyse as slavery. The authors of the sources in question may have been aware of using metaphors, or may have been attempting to convey that certain experiences were as harsh as, and indeed indistinguishable from, slavery. We should take seriously the specific lexical choices made by the subjects of our research when formulating our own lexical choices.²⁴ As historians interpret the interpretations of the authors of their sources, it becomes evident that the latter, too, were engaged in their own analyses of the world around them. This Supplement demonstrates clearly how Ethiopian historical actors grappled with evolving forms of slavery and with the changing meanings of this institution from both their own and other people's perspectives.

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²³ Lovejoy 1983.

²⁴ Wimmmler and Wiegink 2024, 13.

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Slavery in Ethiopia: A Preliminary Bibliography

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This bibliography provides students interested in slavery, the slave trade, and abolition in Ethiopia with a preliminary overview. It includes secondary studies—both chapters and articles—as well as primary sources on these topics. The focus is on works that explicitly reference slavery in their title or subtitle (e.g. chapter titles), rather than attempting to account for the many layered texts that mention slavery only in passing or across genres.

The frequent but unsystematic references to slavery across travel narratives, historical accounts, and ethnographic texts underscore the imbalance between the relatively limited analytical research on slavery and the slave trade and the broader yet scattered mentions of the topic. This bibliography does not aim to include the full range of travel literature that touches on slavery, but focuses instead on sources where slavery is a central theme. Historians have productively engaged with these references, with pioneering contributions from Timothy Fernyhough, Richard Pankhurst, and Ahmed Hassen. Their work has significantly advanced the study of slavery in Ethiopia, particularly regarding the slave trade and related issues in the nineteenth century.¹

Entries from primary publications are interspersed with journalistic texts. Western media's interest in Ethiopia surged after its inclusion in the League of Nations, yet coverage was often shaped by paternalistic narratives that emphasized Ethiopia's perceived inability to end the slave trade and the plight of enslaved people. The sheer volume of publications between the mid-1920s and the outbreak of the Italian–Ethiopian war makes it impossible to include every article here; however, some of the most significant reports are collected. Additionally, the list includes chapters drawn from both eyewitness accounts and ethnographic literature. While these works are not specialized studies on slavery, they touch on aspects of enslavement and bondage within broader economic and cultural contexts. This bibliography includes works that reflect a wide spectrum of interpretations—ranging from Eurocentric, historically propagandistic, or otherwise exaggerated accounts, to those that have earned a place in the field of slavery studies for offering critical perspectives or significant conceptual interventions.

The bibliography is subdivided into four parts:

- 1 Ahmed Hassen 2020; Fernyhough 1986; Pankhurst 1968. Their bibliographies offer a substantial starting point for further research; these should be consulted not only for their content but also for the broader archival pathways they open.

- **Published Primary Sources**—Includes mainly travel literature and ‘contemporary observations’.
- **Published Sources, Translations, and Commentaries**—Contains reference/review articles, and summaries or collections containing larger excerpts of oral or written sources as well as review articles.
- **Published Secondary Sources**—By far the largest section, gathering analytical works on slavery.
- **Unpublished Secondary Sources**—Features MA and PhD dissertations and other unpublished materials.

If the title of a publication does not make its relevance immediately clear, the specific chapter (ch.) or page range (pp.) containing substantial discussion of the topic is indicated. Brief descriptions and *passim* references are not used, as the bibliography focuses only on sustained treatments of the subject, rather than scattered or incidental mentions.

Although collections and archival resources on slavery in Ethiopia are not comprehensively listed here, specialized collections merit attention. A few key materials and repositories are worth noting. Travel reports remain an essential source, offering varied impressions of enslaved life and details on the slave trade, even when slavery is not their primary focus. Additionally, archival materials from travellers—including memoirs, letters, and unpublished documents—provide valuable insights. For instance, the ongoing project to transcribe the unpublished notes of Antoine d’Abbadie is bringing to light new information on slavery in Ethiopia.² Other significant materials include the travel notes ‘Mission to Shoa’ by William Cornwallis Harris, housed in the British Library, which contains an unpublished manuscript titled *Slavery in Abyssinia* (IOR/L/PS/5/413, fols 388–547).

From a colonial perspective, the Historical Diplomatic Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in Rome, as well as the Foreign Records Office in Kew, London, maintain an extensive archive documenting cross-border slave trade in the Horn of Africa, providing critical insights into colonial foreign policy and anti-slavery efforts, especially from the 1920s up to the Italian invasion. The National Archives of Kenya in Nairobi, and of the Sudan in Khartoum, complements these records, focusing on cross-border raids and illicit slave and arms trading along Ethiopia’s southern and western border with the East African Protectorate.

Key collections at institutions such as the SOAS Library and Durham University Library are vital for understanding anti-slavery activities and perspectives. The Papers of Dr Anthony John Arkell, 1887–1947, including Arkell’s 1928 note on the Berta region and the import of Berta slaves into Sudan, offer valuable context on historical practices and cross-border dynamics. These pa-

2 <https://europeana.transcribathon.eu/runs/antoine-dabbadie-run/>, accessed on 12 May 2025.

pers, held at the School of African and Oriental Studies in London (PP MS 71), cover Arkell's tenure as district commissioner for Kosti (White Nile Province) from 1926 to 1929 and for Sennār (Blue Nile Province) from 1929 to 1932.³

At the Bodleian Library in Oxford, the papers of Frederick Lugard, particularly MSS Lugard 89 and Lugard 90 (Ethiopia, c.1920–1944), complement the League of Nations archives, including the Inquiry Commission's report on slavery in Abyssinia, and offer a post-war perspective through Lugard's correspondence with Daniel Sandford, then an advisor to the emperor. Likewise, the De Halpert Papers at the Bodleian Library and the Anti-Slavery Society's archives provide primary sources essential for reconstructing Western views on anti-slavery efforts.⁴

In Ethiopia, the Institute of Ethiopian Studies (IES) houses important documents from Colonel Sandford's tenure as special advisor to Ḥaylā Šəllāse, shedding light on Ethiopian anti-slavery governance and policies. Furthermore, NALA (National Archives and Library Agency), as described in Lacy Noel Feigh's paper in this Supplement, holds crucial documents on anti-slavery efforts post-1940s, contributing valuable Ethiopian perspectives on abolition.

In addition to these archival sources, various periodicals and newspapers provide essential insights into slavery and abolition. The *Anti-Slavery Reporter* offers detailed accounts of British abolitionists' global efforts, dating back to the 1880s and covering key anti-slavery moments.⁵ The Ethiopian newspaper *Bərhanənnā sālam*, held at IES, presents Ethiopian perspectives on slavery and abolition, documenting the visions of Ethiopian abolitionists who advocated for a modern Ethiopia beyond slavery.

At the time of publication, the newly opened Imperial Palace Museum promised to provide comprehensive archival materials on slavery and abolition. However, its contents could not yet be assessed.

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3 See Spaulding 1988.

4 Miers 1985.

5 See Meckelburg and Solomon Gebreyes 2017.

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